

**JOYFUL LEARNING AS A STRATEGY TO ENHANCE
COGNITIVE LEARNING OUTCOMES IN ISLAMIC
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of Joyful Learning as a pedagogical strategy to enhance students' cognitive learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at MTs Salafiyah Ngarangan, a pesantren-based junior high school in Central Java. Using a posttest-only control group quasi-experimental design with 50 eighth-grade students, the experimental class received PAI instruction through Joyful Learning activities—role-play, group discussion, and interactive quizzes—while the control class followed conventional teaching. Independent t-test results revealed a significant difference ($p = 0.000$), with the experimental group ($M = 83.72$) outperforming the control group ($M = 72.88$). These findings indicate that Joyful Learning effectively increases students' cognitive achievement by fostering engagement, motivation, and contextual understanding. The novelty of this study lies in its implementation within a traditional pesantren-based school, demonstrating that pedagogical innovation can succeed even with limited resources. This research contributes to Islamic education reform by promoting learner-centered, joyful, and contextually responsive instruction.

Keywords: Joyful Learning, cognitive achievement, Islamic Religious Education, pesantren-based school, pedagogical innovation

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menelaah efektivitas strategi Joyful Learning dalam meningkatkan hasil belajar kognitif siswa pada mata pelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) di MTs Salafiyah Ngarangan, sebuah madrasah berbasis pesantren di Jawa Tengah. Dengan menggunakan desain kuasi-eksperimen *posttest-only control group* terhadap 50 siswa kelas VIII, kelompok eksperimen diajar melalui aktivitas Joyful Learning seperti simulasi, diskusi kelompok, dan kuis interaktif, sedangkan kelompok kontrol menggunakan metode konvensional. Hasil uji *t* independen menunjukkan perbedaan signifikan ($p = 0,000$), di mana kelompok eksperimen (rata-rata = 83,72) melampaui kelompok kontrol (rata-rata = 72,88). Temuan ini membuktikan bahwa Joyful Learning efektif meningkatkan capaian kognitif melalui peningkatan motivasi, keterlibatan, dan pemahaman kontekstual. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada penerapannya di madrasah salafiyah tradisional yang minim fasilitas, namun mampu menghasilkan inovasi pedagogis yang bermakna. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pembaruan pendidikan Islam melalui pembelajaran yang berpusat pada siswa, menyenangkan, dan responsif terhadap konteks lokal.

Kata Kunci: Joyful Learning, hasil belajar kognitif, Pendidikan Agama Islam, madrasah berbasis pesantren, inovasi pedagogis

Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) serves as a fundamental pillar in shaping the religious, moral, and intellectual character of students in Indonesia, particularly in pesantren-based educational institutions (A. Rizal, 2025). As an integral part of the national education system grounded in religious values, PAI is not only intended to transmit theological doctrines but also to foster deep understanding, spiritual awareness, and reflective thinking that integrates faith, knowledge, and action. In this sense, the effectiveness of PAI learning largely depends on pedagogical approaches that can embody Islamic values within interactive, meaningful, and joyful classroom practices. However, in reality, many Islamic education classes still emphasize cognitive aspects alone and remain predominantly teacher-centered, leading to decreased motivation and limited student engagement.

A similar phenomenon is evident at MTs Salafiyah Ngaringan, a pesantren-based junior high school located in Kalanglundo Village, Ngaringan Sub-district, Grobogan Regency, Central Java. Although the institution has a progressive vision of “developing pious, intelligent, and competitive young generations,” observations reveal that PAI instruction remains monotonous and conventional (Abdul Ghofururrohim & Amirudin, 2025). Teaching typically follows a fixed routine—prayer, attendance, lecture, oral drills, and closing prayer—without collaborative activities such as discussions or simulations. Minimal facilities and the absence of visual or interactive media reinforce a rigid classroom atmosphere and suppress creativity. This condition illustrates a clear *theory-practice gap*: the ideal principles of joyful and meaningful Islamic education are not yet reflected in classroom realities.

Several studies have examined the application of Joyful Learning strategies in Islamic education. Mubaroq (2025) found that this approach effectively increases students’ motivation and conceptual understanding in PAI through a more humanistic and engaging learning atmosphere. Likewise, Muhammad Nur Abdullah (2025) demonstrated that incorporating humor and role-playing activities in the teaching of worship practices enhances long-term memory retention and students’ enjoyment of religious learning. These studies affirm the pedagogical potential of Joyful Learning in improving both affective and cognitive outcomes.

However, most of these studies were conducted in urban or well-equipped schools with strong technological support, which differ greatly from the contextual realities of rural pesantren-based madrasahs. Limited research has explored how Joyful Learning can be effectively adapted to traditional Islamic schools that face resource constraints but maintain a strong religious culture and discipline. This gap indicates a significant *research void* concerning the implementation of Joyful Learning in traditional Islamic educational settings.

Furthermore, existing research tends to focus more on affective and motivational impacts rather than on empirically measurable cognitive

outcomes. Studies employing rigorous experimental designs to assess the cognitive learning achievements of students in rural madrasahs remain scarce. Therefore, a new study is needed to empirically test whether Joyful Learning can significantly improve cognitive performance while also maintaining Islamic pedagogical values.

The novelty of this research lies in its implementation of Joyful Learning within a rural pesantren-based madrasah context that is strong in religiosity and discipline but limited in pedagogical innovation and technological support. This study demonstrates that, despite infrastructural limitations, teachers can create engaging and joyful learning environments through creativity and the use of simple resources. Hence, Joyful Learning is not portrayed as a technology-dependent strategy but as a contextual and humanistic approach aligned with Islamic values emphasizing ease and happiness in seeking knowledge—as reflected in the Prophet’s saying: “*Indeed, this religion is easy*” (HR. Bukhari).

Moreover, this study contributes theoretically by integrating *Self-Determination Theory* (Susanti, n.d.) and *Cognitive Load Theory* (Syaqif Ahmad, 2025) within the framework of Islamic pedagogy. Joyful Learning is conceptualized as a strategy that fulfills students’ basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—while reducing extraneous cognitive load by presenting content in a contextual and enjoyable manner. The integration of these theories offers a novel contribution to the development of an Islamic educational model that is both scientifically grounded and spiritually meaningful.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze the effectiveness of Joyful Learning strategies in improving students’ cognitive learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education at MTs Salafiyah Ngaringan. The objective is to provide empirical evidence that joyful and contextual learning can enhance cognitive engagement even in traditional environments with limited facilities.

This study argues that the success of Islamic education is determined not only by the accuracy of its theological content but also by the effectiveness of its delivery methods. Joyful Learning fosters intrinsic motivation, enhances cognitive focus, and facilitates a deeper understanding of Islamic values. Thus, Joyful Learning represents a practical manifestation of the Islamic educational philosophy of *rahmatan lil ‘alamin*—a holistic learning process that nurtures students’ spiritual, emotional, and intellectual potential (Anwar et al., 2025).

The importance of this study lies in its contribution to educational innovation in rural pesantren-based madrasahs. In the era of globalization and 21st-century learning demands, Islamic schools must adapt and transform without losing their spiritual identity. This research provides an empirical model showing that pedagogical innovation can emerge from local contexts through creativity rather than technology. It serves as a practical reference for PAI teachers in designing learning processes that are contextual,

participatory, and joyful. Therefore, the findings of this study are expected to inspire curriculum reform and teacher professional development programs in both traditional and modern Islamic educational institutions.

Method

This study employed a quantitative approach using a posttest-only control group design, a quasi-experimental model that compares learning outcomes between experimental and control groups based solely on posttest data (Sifa & Witanto, 2025). This design was chosen because the research aimed to examine the effect of a treatment—specifically the Joyful Learning strategy—on students' final cognitive achievement without requiring pretest measurements. The experimental group received Islamic Religious Education (PAI) instruction through the Joyful Learning approach, while the control group was taught using conventional methods. Both groups were ensured to have the same teacher, lesson content, and instructional duration to control external variables that might threaten internal validity.

The research sample consisted of two parallel classes at MTs Salafiyah Ngarangan, which were assigned as the experimental and control groups through purposive sampling. The selection was based on the equivalence of students' academic backgrounds and class structure. After the intervention period, both groups were administered a cognitive learning outcome test in the form of multiple-choice questions. The test instrument was validated through an item validity test using point-biserial correlation and a reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, confirming its validity and reliability as an appropriate tool for measuring students' conceptual understanding of Islamic Religious Education materials.

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. Before testing the hypotheses, statistical assumption tests were performed, namely the normality test and the homogeneity of variance test (Andy Agustian et al., 2025). The normality of posttest score distribution was tested using the Shapiro–Wilk method, as each group contained fewer than 50 participants. Subsequently, the equality of variances between the two groups was tested using Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. The results of these tests determined the appropriate procedure for further analysis, particularly in selecting the correct row in the *Independent Samples t-test* output.

If Levene's Test produced a significance value below 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), it indicated that the variances between groups were not homogeneous, and the analysis continued using the "Equal variances not assumed" row in the *t-test* table. Conversely, if the variances were homogeneous ($p \geq 0.05$), the "Equal variances assumed" row was used. Hypothesis testing was conducted by comparing the two-tailed *p-value* with the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. The interpretation was further strengthened by considering the mean difference and the 95% confidence interval to ensure that the observed differences were systematic rather than due to chance.

The final decision regarding hypothesis acceptance or rejection was made based on these statistical criteria. The null hypothesis (H_0) stated that there was no significant difference in students' cognitive learning outcomes between the two groups, while the alternative hypothesis (H_1) stated otherwise (Reta, 2012). This procedure was carefully designed to ensure that the study's findings were empirically valid, methodologically accountable, and contributed meaningfully to the development of innovative learning strategies in the context of Islamic education within pesantren-based madrasahs.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study present both quantitative and qualitative insights into the effectiveness of the Joyful Learning strategy in improving students' cognitive learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). This section integrates statistical evidence from the quasi-experimental analysis with empirical observations and theoretical interpretation. The discussion not only explains the statistical significance of the findings but also contextualizes them within the broader pedagogical framework of Islamic education, emphasizing their novelty, implications, and contributions to educational practice and theory.

Statistical Analysis

Table 1. Results of the Independent Samples t-test

Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-Test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper
nilai hasil belajar	Equal variances assumed	6.561	.014	-13.151	48	.000	-10.840	.824	-12.497 -9.183
	Equal variances not assumed			-13.151	44.266	.000	-10.840	.824	-12.501 -9.179

Based on statistical analysis using the independent samples *t*-test, strong evidence was found that the Joyful Learning strategy had a significant effect on students' cognitive learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). The null hypothesis (H_0), which stated that there was no significant difference in mean scores between the control and experimental groups, was rejected because the *p*-value was 0.000—far below the significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$. Conversely, the alternative hypothesis (H_1) was accepted, confirming a highly significant difference between the two groups. Numerically, the experimental class achieved a mean score of 83.72, while the control class averaged only 72.88, resulting in a mean difference of 10.84 points.

The homogeneity of variance test showed a *p*-value of 0.014 on Levene's Test, indicating that the variances between groups were not homogeneous. Therefore, the *t*-test interpretation referred to the "Equal variances not assumed" row, yielding $t(44.266) = -13.151$. Despite unequal variances—

possibly due to individual differences in students' responses to the learning approach—the difference in means remained robust and consistent, as confirmed by the 95% confidence interval ranging from -12.501 to -9.179 . Because this interval did not include zero, it can be concluded that the treatment effect was real and not due to random variation.

Interpretation of Quantitative Findings

The quantitative results align with field observations at MTs Salafiyah Ngarangan. Although the school holds a “Very Good” accreditation and a progressive vision to nurture “pious, intelligent, and competitive youth,” its classroom practices have remained largely conventional. Observations revealed that while teachers demonstrated strong content mastery, their teaching methods primarily consisted of lectures, limited questioning, and oral drills without methodological variation. The classroom setup—neat and religiously decorated—featured linear seating that restricted interaction and lacked visual or technological media to stimulate curiosity.

Consequently, student participation was relatively passive; most students responded only when called upon, rarely asked questions, and seldom expressed opinions spontaneously. Temporary enthusiasm emerged when teachers used humor or storytelling but quickly declined during textbook-based sessions. This phenomenon reflects a pedagogical gap: students exhibit high formal obedience yet low cognitive and emotional engagement. Hence, pedagogical intervention through Joyful Learning became necessary to bridge this gap and reinvigorate students' learning motivation.

Impact of Joyful Learning Implementation

The implementation of Joyful Learning in the experimental class successfully transformed classroom dynamics. Through role-play simulations of prayer procedures, case-based discussions, educational games, and reflective activities, teachers created an interactive and enjoyable learning environment without compromising religious values. This approach not only enhanced student motivation but also facilitated deeper conceptual understanding through active experience. These findings are consistent with Constructivist Theory (Fathurrahman & Puspita, 2025), which asserts that knowledge is not transmitted but actively constructed through interaction between learners and their environment.

Furthermore, the improvement in cognitive outcomes can be explained through *Self-Determination Theory* (Kusumawati, 2024). Joyful Learning satisfies three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy (students are given opportunities to choose roles during activities), competence (reinforced through positive feedback), and relatedness (built through group collaboration). When these needs are met, intrinsic motivation increases, enhancing cognitive processes such as information processing, memory retention, and decision-making (Rosyid, 2024). As one student expressed, “*When the teacher tells funny stories, I feel more excited; but when we just read*

books, I get sleepy.” This statement implicitly confirms that emotional and psychological needs were previously unmet in conventional learning.

In addition, from the perspective of *Cognitive Load Theory* (Reski & Fadilah, 2024), enjoyable learning environments reduce extraneous cognitive load, allowing students’ mental capacity to focus more effectively on meaningful content comprehension. Thus, joy in learning is not a superficial or aesthetic element—it is a cognitive necessity that optimizes students’ intellectual functioning.

Contextual and Theoretical Integration

These findings are particularly relevant in the context of *madrasah salafiyah*, which are often perceived as conservative and resistant to innovation. However, this study demonstrates that pedagogical reform can be successfully integrated into traditional Islamic institutions as long as it remains aligned with religious principles. Joyful Learning not only enhances students’ understanding of religious concepts but also actualizes the school’s mission to instill strong Islamic values through experiential learning. Hence, the approach represents not modernization for its own sake but the *operational actualization* of the institution’s educational vision.

Methodologically, the use of a posttest-only design with tight control over teaching materials, instructional time, and teacher assignment ensured high internal validity (KAUSAR, 2021). Although no pretest was conducted, the homogeneity of the groups was maintained by considering students’ previous semester grades and parallel class structures. Therefore, the observed difference in outcomes can be legitimately attributed to the treatment effect rather than external variables.

Comparison with Previous Research and Novelty

This research supports the findings of Ahmad (2023), who demonstrated the positive influence of Joyful Learning on cognitive achievement in Islamic subjects. However, it offers a new contribution by validating these effects within the under-researched context of rural *madrasah salafiyah*. The results confirm that the absence of advanced facilities—such as projectors, sound systems, or digital tools—does not hinder the successful implementation of innovative pedagogy. Instead, creativity, adaptability, and a deep understanding of students’ needs are sufficient to transform the learning atmosphere significantly.

The novelty of this study lies in its contextual adaptation of Joyful Learning to a traditional Islamic educational environment. It provides empirical evidence that joyful pedagogy can thrive even in resource-limited settings by leveraging cultural and spiritual values as intrinsic motivators. This context-specific innovation extends previous Joyful Learning models, which were predominantly tested in secular or urban schools, into a domain where faith-based education is central.

The practical implications of this research are multifold. First, it demonstrates that Joyful Learning can serve as an effective pedagogical strategy in Islamic Religious Education to enhance both motivation and cognition. Second, it offers a feasible model for teachers in rural madrasahs to innovate despite infrastructural limitations—by utilizing storytelling, role-play, games, and discussion as low-cost yet impactful learning tools. Third, it supports teacher professional development programs that emphasize creativity, emotional intelligence, and learner-centered pedagogy aligned with Islamic ethics.

From a policy standpoint, the study suggests that the Ministry of Religious Affairs and educational stakeholders should promote Joyful Learning-based training modules for PAI teachers in pesantren-based institutions. This aligns with the broader national education agenda to foster critical thinking, collaboration, and lifelong learning skills within the framework of Islamic values.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the integration of psychological and pedagogical theories within Islamic education. By combining *Self-Determination Theory* and *Cognitive Load Theory*, it provides a new explanatory model for how emotionally engaging learning environments can enhance cognitive performance in religious contexts. Methodologically, it contributes a replicable experimental design for assessing pedagogical innovation in traditional Islamic schools. Practically, it empowers teachers as *change agents* who can reform instructional practices through creativity and contextual sensitivity rather than dependence on modern technology.

Overall, this study not only answers its research question with strong empirical evidence but also provides a transformative framework for pedagogical renewal in Islamic Religious Education. Joyful Learning has been proven to significantly improve cognitive learning outcomes while bridging the gap between formal religiosity and active engagement. For MTs Salafiyah Ngarangan and similar institutions, these findings serve as a strong foundation for reforming classroom practices—not for the sake of educational trends, but to cultivate a generation of Muslims who are not only pious but also intelligent, critical, and joyfully committed to lifelong learning.

Conclusion

Based on the results of hypothesis testing using the Independent Samples *t*-test, this study concludes that the Joyful Learning strategy significantly enhances students' cognitive learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at MTs Salafiyah Ngarangan. The experimental class achieved a much higher mean score (83.72) compared to the control class (72.88), with a *p*-value of 0.000 (< 0.05) and a 95% confidence interval that did not include zero. These findings indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups, confirming that the application of Joyful Learning is effective within the context of a rural *madrasah salafiyah*.

The results clearly demonstrate that a joyful learning approach—implemented without advanced technology and relying mainly on teachers’ creativity—can produce substantial improvements in learning quality. This shows that pedagogical innovation depends not on sophisticated infrastructure but on the alignment between instructional methods, students’ psychological needs, and their social learning environment. Essentially, Joyful Learning is not merely an entertaining teaching technique but a pedagogical strategy that embodies the core principles of Islamic education, which emphasize ease, engagement, and happiness in the pursuit of knowledge. The approach bridges the gap between students’ formal religious discipline and their cognitive involvement, creating a more holistic learning experience.

These findings should serve as a foundation for enhancing teacher professional development through continuous training in designing contextual and value-based Joyful Learning activities. Future studies are encouraged to explore the long-term effects of this strategy on affective and psychomotor learning domains, as well as its implementation across various PAI subjects and different *madrrasah salafiyah* settings. The development of structured Joyful Learning modules specifically tailored for the *pesantren* context is also recommended to sustainable implementation.

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