

Teachers' Efforts in Islamic Religious Education to Improve Students' Understanding of Islamic Cultural History Material at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan

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Abstrak

This study aims to explore the instructional practices of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in facilitating students' understanding of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) materials at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School, Medan, and to identify supporting and inhibiting factors in the learning process. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach involving 14 informants selected through purposive sampling, consisting of one PAI teacher, one vice principal for curriculum affairs, and twelve Grade VII students. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña with source and methodological triangulation. The findings indicate that teachers utilized PowerPoint presentations, projectors, storytelling methods, and group discussions in SKI learning. Participants perceived these practices as supporting student engagement in learning activities. Supporting factors included learning facilities and student interest, while inhibiting factors involved diverse learning needs, prior knowledge differences, classroom characteristics, and the complexity of historical materials. This study describes instructional practices and participant perceptions rather than measuring direct changes in students' understanding.

Article Information

Kata Kunci:

Pendidikan Agama Islam,
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Praktik Pembelajaran,
Proses Pembelajaran.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi praktik pembelajaran guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) dalam memfasilitasi pemahaman siswa terhadap materi Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam (SKI) di SMP Islam Al-Ulum Terpadu Medan, serta mengidentifikasi faktor pendukung dan penghambat dalam proses pembelajaran. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan melibatkan 14 informan yang dipilih melalui teknik *purposive sampling*, yang terdiri atas satu guru PAI, satu wakil kepala sekolah bidang kurikulum, dan dua belas siswa kelas VII. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi pembelajaran di kelas, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan analisis dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña melalui triangulasi sumber dan metode. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru menerapkan berbagai praktik pembelajaran SKI, yaitu penggunaan media PowerPoint, proyektor, metode kisah atau bercerita, serta diskusi kelompok. Peserta penelitian memandang praktik tersebut mendukung keterlibatan siswa dalam aktivitas pembelajaran. Faktor pendukung meliputi ketersediaan fasilitas pembelajaran dan minat belajar siswa, sedangkan faktor penghambat mencakup keberagaman kebutuhan belajar siswa, perbedaan pengetahuan awal, karakteristik kelas, dan kompleksitas materi sejarah. Penelitian ini menggambarkan praktik pembelajaran dan persepsi peserta, bukan mengukur perubahan langsung terhadap pemahaman siswa.

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1. Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays an important role in developing students' religious knowledge, moral values, and character. Within the PAI curriculum, Islamic Cultural History (SKI) is not merely intended to introduce historical events but also to help students understand the development of Islamic civilization and internalize the values exemplified by prominent Muslim figures. Effective SKI learning is therefore expected to enable students not only to recall historical facts but also to derive moral lessons (*ibrah*) and apply them in their daily lives [1]. Therefore, SKI learning not only aims to make students know historical facts, but also so that they are able to take wisdom and emulate the noble values contained in it. Well-designed PAI learning can help students understand Islamic values while forming religious character in daily life [2]. Previous studies have consistently shown that teachers can enhance SKI learning by employing various instructional strategies, including storytelling, group discussions, visual media, PowerPoint presentations, and audio-visual learning resources [3].

The researcher also found a problem in learning cultural history in this junior high school, namely differences in learning styles among students. Each student has different learning characteristics, some of which are easier to understand the material through the teacher's oral explanation, others are more helped by visual media such as pictures, concept maps, and videos, while some students understand the material better through discussions, group work, or activities that involve direct participation. These differences in learning styles cause students' understanding of the material to be unequal. If teachers use one learning method uniformly without adjusting to the characteristics of the students, then some students will have difficulty understanding the material optimally. Student understanding is one of the important indicators in determining learning success. Students are said to understand the material if they are able to re-explain the material in their own language, relate the concepts learned with previous knowledge, and take the meaning and value of the material. In the context of SKI learning, students' understanding is not only measured by the ability to remember historical facts, but also by the ability to take *ibrah* (lessons) and apply them in daily life. In an effort to improve students' understanding, Islamic Religious Education teachers play a very important role. Teachers not only function as material presenters, but also as facilitators, motivators, supervisors, and evaluators.

Teachers are required to be able to design learning strategies, methods, and media that are in accordance with the characteristics of students so that material that is considered difficult can be understood more easily. The right learning strategy will create an active, fun, and meaningful learning

atmosphere. Research [4] [5] explained that the learning strategy of PAI teachers has a significant effect on improving the quality of SKI learning. Therefore, teachers must have skills in choosing the appropriate approach so that historical material that is often considered boring can be conveyed in an interesting and easy to understand by students. In addition to learning strategies, the use of learning media also has an important role in helping students understand the material. visual media such as *PowerPoint*, learning videos, pictures, can clarify the flow of events and make it easier for students to understand the relationship between characters and events. Research [5], [6] shows that the use of audio-visual media in SKI learning is able to increase students' understanding of the material. Teachers' efforts can also be carried out through providing motivation and the application of varied learning methods. Learning motivation will encourage students to be more active in the learning process, while variations in learning methods can reduce boredom and increase student enthusiasm. [7], [8] found that PAI teachers succeeded in increasing students' interest in learning Islamic Cultural History material through the use of varied learning methods and continuous motivation. Teachers also try to create an active learning atmosphere through question and answer activities, discussions, and assignments so that students are more involved in the learning process.

However, previous research has primarily examined the effectiveness of individual instructional methods or learning media, while limited attention has been given to how teachers integrate multiple pedagogical strategies simultaneously to address diverse student learning needs within authentic classroom settings. Most existing studies evaluate specific interventions, such as multimedia or discussion methods, rather than exploring teachers' comprehensive pedagogical efforts that combine instructional planning, classroom interaction, learning media, motivation, and classroom management. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how PAI teachers adapt their instructional practices to overcome students' learning difficulties in Islamic Cultural History in everyday classroom contexts.

This gap is particularly relevant because students often experience difficulties in learning SKI due to the large amount of historical information, including names of historical figures, chronological events, locations, and historical concepts that must be understood simultaneously. Classroom observations conducted during the preliminary study at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan revealed that students demonstrated different levels of participation and understanding during SKI lessons. While some students responded positively to teachers' explanations supported by visual presentations, others participated more actively during storytelling sessions or collaborative discussions. These variations indicate that students require different forms of instructional support rather than a

single uniform teaching approach. Despite these classroom realities, no previous study has specifically investigated how PAI teachers at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School integrate various instructional strategies, learning media, motivational techniques, and classroom interactions to facilitate students' understanding of SKI materials. Therefore, the existing literature provides limited evidence regarding the practical pedagogical processes through which teachers respond to diverse classroom situations and students' learning needs in Islamic secondary education.

The present study addresses this gap by examining teachers' instructional efforts as a holistic pedagogical practice rather than evaluating a single teaching method. The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive analysis of teachers' integrated instructional practices including lesson delivery, learning media, classroom interaction, student engagement, motivational support, and contextual adaptation in one authentic Islamic junior high school setting. Rather than measuring the effectiveness of a particular instructional model, this study seeks to explain how multiple pedagogical practices are combined by teachers to facilitate students' understanding of SKI materials. The selection of Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan as the research site is significant because the school implements an integrated Islamic curriculum while simultaneously facing diverse student characteristics and learning challenges in SKI classes. Investigating this context provides empirical evidence of how teachers manage instructional complexity within an Islamic school environment and offers practical insights that may inform similar educational settings. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze in depth the efforts of Islamic Religious Education teachers in facilitating students' understanding of Islamic Cultural History at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan. The findings are expected to contribute conceptually to the literature on Islamic Religious Education by enriching understanding of teacher pedagogical practices in SKI learning, while also providing practical recommendations for teachers and schools seeking to improve the quality of Islamic Cultural History instruction.

2. Research Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore in depth the efforts of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in improving students' understanding of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School, Medan. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to examine participants' experiences, meanings, and teaching practices within their natural educational setting, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the learning process through teacher-student interactions, instructional strategies, and students' responses [9]. The participants consisted of one Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher who taught Grade VII SKI, one vice principal for curriculum affairs, and twelve Grade VII students, resulting in a total of 14 informants. Participants were selected using

purposive sampling, as they possessed direct experience and relevant knowledge regarding the implementation of SKI learning. The teacher was selected because he/she was responsible for teaching SKI in Grade VII, the vice principal was included because of his/her role in supervising curriculum implementation and instructional quality, while the students were selected to represent different levels of academic achievement and classroom participation (high, moderate, and low) to obtain diverse perspectives regarding the learning process.

Data were collected from March to May 2026 through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Four classroom observations were conducted in Grade VII classes, with each observation lasting approximately 90 minutes (two lesson periods). These observations focused on teachers' instructional strategies, classroom interactions, students' participation, and the use of learning media during SKI lessons. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all informants, including the PAI teacher (approximately 60 minutes), the vice principal (approximately 45 minutes), and each student (approximately 20–30 minutes). Supporting documents, including lesson plans, teaching materials, presentation slides, and school learning documents, were also collected to strengthen the findings. Prior to data collection, the researchers obtained formal permission from the principal of Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School. All participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences.

Written informed consent was obtained from the teacher and vice principal, while parental consent and students' verbal assent were secured for all participating students. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used throughout the reporting of the findings. The interview process was audio-recorded using a mobile phone with participants' permission. The recordings were transcribed verbatim using the Transcriber application and subsequently reviewed manually by the researchers to ensure transcription accuracy before analysis. The use of multiple data collection techniques aimed to enhance the completeness and credibility of the findings. Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The analysis began with data familiarization, during which the researchers repeatedly read the interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Subsequently, open coding was conducted by assigning meaningful labels to relevant statements related to teachers' instructional efforts, students' learning experiences, supporting factors, and learning barriers. Similar codes were then grouped into broader categories, such as instructional strategies, instructional media, classroom interaction, student engagement, supporting factors, and inhibiting factors. These categories were subsequently synthesized into overarching themes that represented the major findings of the study [11].

The coding, categorization, and theme development were conducted primarily by the first researcher and subsequently reviewed by the co-researchers. Any differences in coding or interpretation were discussed until consensus was achieved to ensure analytical consistency and reduce individual researcher bias. Data analysis continued iteratively alongside data collection until data saturation was reached, indicated by the

absence of new categories or themes emerging from subsequent interviews and observations. The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing information obtained from the PAI teacher, vice principal, and students, while methodological triangulation involved comparing evidence derived from interviews, classroom observations, and documentary analysis [10]. Furthermore, observational findings were continuously compared with interview responses and supporting documents to verify consistency. Any discrepancies between data sources were re-examined through repeated analysis of the original transcripts and field notes and were clarified through follow-up discussions with the relevant participants before final conclusions were drawn. This rigorous analytical procedure enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study findings.

3. Result and Discussion

Result

Students' Understanding of Islamic Cultural History Materials at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan

Analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and school documents revealed that students demonstrated varying levels of understanding of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) materials. The data consistently indicated that most Grade VII students were able to explain the main concepts presented during the lessons, although some continued to experience difficulties in understanding historical chronology, remembering key figures, and connecting historical events. The Islamic Religious Education teacher (Participant T1) explained that most students were able to follow the learning activities, although several students still required additional explanation, particularly when studying topics containing numerous historical figures and chronological events. *"Most students understand the material presented during the lesson. However, several students still need further explanation because SKI contains many historical figures, dates, and events that are sometimes difficult for them to remember. Therefore, I need to present the material in a more engaging way."* (T1, interview, May 5, 2026)

This finding was supported by classroom observations conducted during four SKI lessons. The observations showed that most students paid attention to the teacher's explanations, responded to classroom questions, and actively participated in group discussions. Several students were able to explain the background of the Umayyad Dynasty in Damascus, identify major historical figures, and describe several important developments during the dynasty. However, observational field notes also documented that a number of students were hesitant when asked to arrange historical events chronologically or identify the contribution of particular historical figures without teacher guidance. Document analysis further supported these

observations. Students' classroom worksheets indicated that most students correctly identified the main characteristics of the Umayyad Dynasty and answered conceptual questions regarding its historical development. Nevertheless, several worksheets contained incomplete chronological explanations and confusion regarding the sequence of historical events, indicating that some students still experienced difficulties in organizing historical information.

The findings were corroborated by the Vice Principal for Curriculum (Participant VP1), who confirmed that students generally demonstrated satisfactory participation during SKI learning but displayed different levels of conceptual understanding. *"Based on our classroom monitoring, most students actively participate in learning activities and are able to answer teachers' questions. Nevertheless, some students still require additional guidance because each student understands the material differently."* (VP1, interview, May 5, 2026). Students also described different learning experiences during the interviews. One participant stated that historical materials became easier to understand when teachers provided clear explanations supported by visual presentations and classroom discussions. *"I understand the lesson better when the teacher explains it using slides and discusses it with us because I can see the sequence of events more clearly."* (S3, interview, May 18, 2026)

Although most participants perceived that students were able to understand the main content of the SKI lessons, the data also revealed variation in students' understanding. Some students demonstrated confidence in explaining historical events independently, whereas others relied on teacher prompts or peer discussion before responding. These findings suggest that students possessed different levels of conceptual understanding and required different forms of instructional support during SKI learning. Overall, the convergence of interview data, classroom observations, and document analysis indicates that students generally demonstrated an adequate understanding of the SKI materials taught during the observed lessons. However, the findings also reveal that understanding varied across students, particularly regarding historical chronology, identification of key figures, and interpretation of historical events. Therefore, rather than indicating that students' understanding had improved, the present findings describe participants' perceptions and observed evidence regarding students' current understanding within the observed classroom context.

Efforts of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Improving Students' Understanding of Islamic Cultural History Materials

Data analysis identified the use of visual learning media as one of the dominant strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers to facilitate students' understanding of

Islamic Cultural History (SKI) materials. Classroom observations conducted in Grade VII indicated that teachers consistently utilized PowerPoint presentations and LCD projectors when explaining the topics of the Umayyad Dynasty in Damascus and the Umayyad Dynasty in Spain. Observation notes showed that the presentation slides contained chronological timelines, maps of Islamic territorial expansion, portraits of historical figures, and concise summaries of important events.

During these sessions, most students paid attention to the teacher's explanations, responded to questions, and referred to the visual materials while completing classroom tasks. Several students were observed taking notes directly from the slides, while others asked clarification questions regarding the sequence of historical events. The teacher explained *"I use PowerPoint because SKI contains many historical events, figures, and dates. When students can see the chronology visually, they understand the relationships among events more easily."* (Interview, May 5, 2026). Student interviews supported this observation. Student (S2) *"The slides help me understand the material more clearly. It is easier to remember the sequence of events because everything is displayed visually."* (Interview, May 18, 2026).

Document analysis of the teacher's lesson plan (RPP) and presentation materials also showed that visual media were intentionally integrated into every SKI lesson to summarize key concepts and historical timelines. These findings indicate that visual media were consistently incorporated into classroom instruction and were perceived by both teachers and students as facilitating access to complex historical information. However, observational data also showed that several students still required additional explanation despite the use of visual presentations. During classroom observations, the teacher frequently transformed historical content into chronological narratives rather than presenting isolated historical facts. Instead of merely listing names and dates, the teacher described the background of the establishment of the Umayyad Dynasty, political developments, and leadership transitions through narrative explanations.

The teacher explained *"Students become more interested when history is presented as a story. They can imagine how the events happened instead of only memorizing names and years."* (Interview, May 5, 2026). Student interviews reflected similar perceptions. Student (S4) *"When the teacher tells the story, I can imagine what happened. It makes the lesson more interesting and easier to follow."* (Interview, May 18, 2026). Observation records also showed that students tended to ask more questions during storytelling sessions than during conventional explanations. Nevertheless, several students continued to ask for clarification regarding the chronological order of events, indicating differences in how students processed historical

information. The third theme identified from the analysis was the implementation of group discussion activities. Observation data indicated that students were divided into three discussion groups.

Each group was assigned a different subtopic related to the Umayyad Dynasty, including establishment of the dynasty, achievements of the caliphs, factors contributing to its decline. Each group presented its findings before participating in whole-class discussions. The teacher stated *"Students work in groups so that each group becomes responsible for one part of the lesson before presenting it to the class."* (Interview, May 5, 2026). Observation notes indicated that discussion sessions generated active peer interaction. Students asked questions, corrected one another's explanations, and referred to textbooks while preparing presentations.

Student responses also reflected positive perceptions. Student (S5) *"Discussion helps because we explain the material to each other. Sometimes I understand my friend's explanation more easily."* (Interview, May 18, 2026). Another student commented Student (S6) *"Presenting the discussion results makes me review the material before explaining it to others."* (Interview, May 18, 2026). Documentation collected during the study, including students' group worksheets and presentation notes, showed that each group summarized historical events using concept maps and chronological outlines. Despite these positive observations, classroom observations also revealed variation in participation levels. While some students actively contributed to discussions, several remained passive and relied on more active peers during group presentations.

Across interviews, observations, and classroom documents, most students demonstrated active participation by answering questions, participating in discussions, and explaining historical events in their own words. However, not all students demonstrated similar engagement. Observation records documented that several students still experienced difficulties remembering historical figures, dates, and chronological sequences despite the use of visual media and storytelling. The vice principal for curriculum confirmed these observations Vice Principal (VP1) *"Most students participate actively during SKI lessons. Nevertheless, some still require additional guidance because students respond differently to the learning process."* (Interview, May 5, 2026). Similarly, the teacher stated Teacher (T1) *"Some students still need repeated explanations, especially when learning historical chronology and remembering important figures."* (Interview, May 5, 2026). Field notes further showed that the teacher frequently repeated explanations and invited students to restate historical events in their own words before moving to subsequent topics. Rather than indicating uniform outcomes, these findings suggest that students

responded differently to the instructional strategies employed, highlighting the need for adaptive instructional approaches to accommodate diverse learning needs.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Improving Students' Understanding of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) Materials

The findings indicate that the availability of school facilities was one of the important factors supporting the implementation of SKI learning. Based on classroom observations, the school provided several facilities used by teachers during learning activities, including LCD projectors, whiteboards, comfortable classrooms, and digital learning equipment. These facilities enabled teachers to present SKI materials through PowerPoint presentations containing historical timelines, important figures, and summaries of Islamic historical events. Observation notes showed that when visual media were used, students tended to pay closer attention to the teacher's explanation and were more actively involved in classroom interactions. Students referred to the displayed materials when answering questions and completing learning tasks.

The PAI teacher explained *"The availability of facilities such as projectors really helps me deliver SKI material. When I use PowerPoint, I can present historical sequences, figures, and important events more systematically so students can follow the explanation more easily."* (Interview, May 5, 2026). This finding was supported by document analysis of the teacher's learning materials, which showed that PowerPoint presentations were integrated into SKI lessons, particularly in explaining the topics of the Umayyad Dynasty in Damascus and Spain. Besides infrastructure, students' engagement during learning activities also appeared as a supporting factor. Classroom observations indicated that many students participated in question-and-answer sessions, responded to teacher explanations, and contributed during group discussions. However, the level of participation varied among students.

The vice principal for curriculum confirmed this condition: Vice Principal (VP1) *"Generally, students participate well during SKI learning. They are willing to answer questions and join discussions, although some students still need additional guidance because their ability to understand the material is different."* (Interview, May 5, 2026). These findings show that adequate learning facilities and student participation created conditions that supported the implementation of SKI learning, although students' responses remained diverse. The analysis also identified differences among students as one of the challenges faced by teachers in implementing SKI learning. Interview data showed that students demonstrated different preferences in receiving and processing historical information. Some students

responded better to visual explanations, while others benefited more from oral explanations, storytelling, or interactive classroom activities.

The PAI teacher stated *"One of the challenges is that students have different characteristics. Some students understand better when I explain verbally, some need pictures or slides, while others are more active when involved in discussion activities."* (Interview, May 5, 2026). Classroom observations supported this statement. During lessons, several students actively responded to visual presentations and teacher explanations, while some students remained less involved and required additional explanation from the teacher. Rather than categorizing students into fixed learning styles, the findings indicate differences in students' learning needs and levels of engagement during SKI lessons.

The teacher responded to these differences by combining several instructional approaches, including visual presentations, storytelling, questioning activities, and group discussions. For example, observation records showed that after explaining historical material through PowerPoint, the teacher invited students to discuss specific topics in groups. Students were then asked to present their discussion results to the class. This strategy allowed students who were less active during explanation sessions to participate through collaborative activities. The teacher explained *"Because students have different ways of understanding the material, I try to vary the activities. After explaining the material, I usually involve students in discussions and presentations so they can actively participate."* (Interview, May 5, 2026).

Another challenge identified from the data was the nature of SKI material itself. Students experienced difficulties when dealing with historical information containing numerous names, dates, places, and chronological events. Observation findings showed that although many students were able to answer questions related to the general content of the lesson, several students still needed repeated explanations when asked to recall the sequence of historical events and relationships between figures. A student explained: Student (S3) *"Sometimes it is difficult to remember all the names and years because there are many historical events. The explanation becomes easier when the teacher uses pictures or tells the story."* (Interview, May 18, 2026). The teacher also acknowledged this difficulty *"The challenge in SKI is that students sometimes feel overwhelmed by many names, dates, and events. Therefore, I try to present the material gradually and use different methods."* (Interview, May 5, 2026). These findings indicate that the complexity of historical content requires teachers to organize materials carefully and provide opportunities for students to revisit important concepts.

Discussion

Students' Understanding of Islamic Cultural History Materials at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan

The findings of this study reveal that students' understanding of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) materials at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan is manifested through students' ability to explain historical events, identify important figures, describe the development of Islamic civilization, and interpret educational values contained in historical narratives. This finding indicates that students' understanding of SKI is not limited to the ability to memorize historical information, such as names of figures, places, and dates of events, but also involves the ability to comprehend meanings, lessons, and relevance of historical events in contemporary life.

This perspective is consistent with previous studies which emphasize that SKI learning has a broader educational function than merely transferring historical knowledge. SKI learning is expected to expand students' Islamic historical insights while simultaneously instilling exemplary values through narratives of the struggles, achievements, and challenges experienced by Islamic figures in the past [10], [11]. Therefore, historical understanding in Islamic education contains both cognitive and value dimensions, where students are encouraged not only to know historical facts but also to understand the significance and moral lessons embedded within those events. The findings of this study also indicate that most students have demonstrated the ability to reconstruct historical information related to the Umayyad Dynasty in Damascus, identify important figures, and explain aspects of Islamic civilization development during that period. However, students' understanding was not completely homogeneous. Some students still experienced difficulties in remembering chronological sequences, names of historical figures, and relationships between events. This variation demonstrates that students' understanding develops at different levels depending on their prior knowledge, learning experiences, and engagement during the learning process.

From the perspective of constructivist learning theory, these findings illustrate that understanding is constructed through an active process in which students connect new historical information with their existing knowledge structures. Students who are able to explain historical events using their own interpretations indicate a deeper understanding because they have processed and reconstructed information rather than simply memorizing it. This is in line with the view that comprehension can be identified through students' ability to reinterpret information, provide examples, and apply knowledge in different contexts [12], [13]. The challenge faced by some students in remembering historical details reflects a common issue in history education. Historical materials often contain complex information involving numerous figures, chronological

events, and geographical contexts. When learning emphasizes factual recall without sufficient opportunities for interpretation, students may experience cognitive difficulties in organizing historical knowledge. Therefore, history learning requires approaches that encourage students to understand relationships between events, historical contexts, and the values contained in those events rather than focusing solely on memorization.

The findings further show that students' engagement during learning activities is an important element in supporting the development of understanding. Students who actively participated in classroom discussions, responded to teacher questions, and explained historical materials demonstrated a greater ability to interpret learning content. This supports the principles of active learning, which emphasize that meaningful understanding occurs when students are involved cognitively and socially in the learning process. Through interaction and discussion, students have opportunities to clarify information, exchange perspectives, and construct knowledge collaboratively. However, this study also found that active participation does not necessarily result in identical levels of understanding among all students. Several students still required additional explanation from teachers, particularly when dealing with historical chronology and the relationship between events.

This condition indicates the importance of considering students' individual learning needs and providing appropriate instructional support. As explained by the Deputy Principal for Curriculum, differences in students' ability to understand learning materials require teachers to implement varied approaches so that students can access the material according to their learning conditions. In Islamic educational perspectives, the importance of understanding historical narratives is also reflected in the Qur'anic approach to conveying lessons through historical accounts. The story of Prophet Musa (AS) mentioned in Q.S. Al-Qashash verse 43 illustrates that historical narratives function as guidance and reflection for human beings. Historical accounts in Islamic teachings are not presented merely as records of past events but as sources of wisdom and moral guidance [14]. This principle is relevant to SKI learning, where historical materials should encourage students to understand the meaning behind events and connect historical values with their personal and social lives.

The findings of this study support previous research indicating that meaningful learning approaches are important in Islamic history education. Learning becomes more effective when students are encouraged to explore historical meanings, identify exemplary values, and relate past events to present contexts. Therefore, SKI teachers have an important role not only as transmitters of historical information but also as facilitators who help students interpret Islamic historical narratives. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the understanding that SKI learning involves an interaction

between historical knowledge, students' cognitive processes, and value interpretation. Understanding Islamic history is formed through a process of knowing, interpreting, and reflecting on historical events. Thus, the success of SKI learning cannot be measured only by students' ability to recall historical facts but also by their ability to explain meanings and lessons derived from those facts.

Practically, this study implies that SKI teachers need to design learning experiences that balance factual mastery and historical interpretation. Strategies such as contextual explanation, storytelling, multimedia use, collaborative discussion, and reflective activities can help students engage more deeply with historical materials. However, these strategies should be implemented together with continuous assessment to identify students who still experience difficulties and provide appropriate learning assistance. Therefore, students' understanding of Islamic Cultural History materials at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan should be viewed as a dynamic learning process influenced by instructional approaches, classroom interaction, and students' individual learning conditions. The findings do not directly demonstrate an increase in students' understanding, but rather illustrate the existing conditions of students' comprehension and the factors that shape their ability to interpret Islamic historical materials meaningfully.

Efforts of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Improving Students' Understanding of Islamic Cultural History Materials

The findings of this study demonstrate that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan facilitate students' understanding of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) materials through three main instructional strategies: the utilization of learning media, storytelling methods, and collaborative discussion activities. These strategies indicate that SKI learning is not merely focused on transferring historical facts but also on supporting students in organizing historical information, interpreting events, and constructing meaningful understanding. In this context, students' comprehension of SKI materials depends not only on the availability of information but also on how teachers transform historical content into learning experiences that are accessible and meaningful.

The first strategy identified is the use of learning media, particularly PowerPoint presentations and projectors. The findings indicate that visual representations containing historical timelines, important figures, locations, and key events helped students follow the explanation more systematically. This finding supports previous research emphasizing that learning media functions as a tool that facilitates the delivery of learning materials, making the learning process more interesting,

interactive, and easier for students to understand. The use of multimedia, including PowerPoint, videos, animations, and audiovisual materials, has been reported to increase students' motivation, engagement, and understanding because abstract learning content can be presented through more concrete representations [14]. The effectiveness of learning media in SKI learning can be explained through Mayer's cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which argues that students learn more effectively when information is presented through integrated verbal and visual channels. Historical materials such as the Umayyad Dynasty contain complex information involving chronological relationships, historical figures, political developments, and cultural achievements.

If such materials are delivered only through oral explanations, students may experience difficulties in organizing and remembering information. Therefore, visual media provides cognitive support by helping students structure historical information and connect different elements of the material. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies stating that learning media can increase students' attention, interest, and understanding because media assists teachers in creating a more effective and attractive learning environment [15]. However, the findings also indicate that the effectiveness of media depends on pedagogical integration rather than the presence of technology itself. Multimedia presentations that only display information without encouraging questioning, interpretation, or reflection may still position students as passive recipients. Therefore, teachers play an essential role in transforming media from merely a presentation tool into a cognitive instrument that supports historical reasoning.

The use of visual representations in learning is also consistent with the educational practices demonstrated by Prophet Muhammad PBUH, who used illustrations and analogies when explaining concepts to the companions. The hadith narrated regarding the Prophet's use of lines and illustrations to explain human life demonstrates that visual representations can function as an effective means of simplifying complex meanings. Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani explained that these illustrations helped the companions understand abstract concepts through concrete representations [16]. This principle is relevant to contemporary education because effective learning media should not only present information but also help learners construct meaning from the information provided. Thus, the use of visual media in SKI learning reflects a broader educational principle that meaningful understanding can be developed through appropriate representations. The second strategy identified in this study is the storytelling method. Storytelling is particularly relevant for SKI learning because Islamic history is fundamentally structured around narratives involving figures, civilizations, struggles, and historical developments. Through storytelling, teachers transform historical materials from a sequence of facts

into interconnected narratives.

This allows students to understand relationships between events rather than merely memorize names, dates, and locations. The effectiveness of storytelling can be understood through narrative learning perspectives, which explain that individuals naturally organize knowledge through stories and chronological structures. Historical understanding requires students not only to remember information but also to interpret historical contexts and relationships between events. [17] emphasizes that historical thinking involves interpreting evidence, understanding context, and constructing meaning from historical narratives. Therefore, storytelling provides a learning structure that supports students in understanding historical processes.

This finding strengthens previous research indicating that storytelling methods can increase students' attention and engagement because stories create emotional and cognitive connections with learning materials [18]. In SKI learning, where students often perceive historical materials as difficult due to the large number of figures, dates, and events, storytelling can make materials more accessible by presenting them in a coherent storyline. Previous studies also explain that storytelling is effective because it enables students to imagine historical situations, understand event sequences, and capture values contained in learning materials [19]. Nevertheless, this study also reveals that storytelling does not automatically result in identical levels of understanding among students. Some students may become more interested and engaged through narratives, while others may still experience difficulties in remembering detailed historical information. This difference suggests that storytelling primarily supports students' engagement and contextual understanding but needs to be combined with other instructional activities, such as discussion, questioning, and reflection. Students' prior knowledge, learning experiences, motivation, and individual learning needs influence how they process historical narratives. The third strategy found in this study is group discussion.

The implementation of discussion activities reflects an effort to encourage student-centered learning, where students actively participate in exploring information, exchanging ideas, and explaining concepts to peers. This finding is consistent with [20] social constructivist theory, which states that knowledge develops through interaction with others and through social support provided by teachers and peers. Through discussion, students are encouraged to reorganize information and articulate their understanding using their own words. This process supports deeper cognitive engagement because explaining concepts to others requires students to analyze and reconstruct their knowledge. The finding is also aligned with active learning theory proposed by Bonwell and which emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs when students actively participate in thinking, discussing, and reflecting rather than only receiving

information. Previous studies similarly indicate that collaborative learning activities can increase student participation and facilitate understanding because students become involved in knowledge construction processes. However, the findings of this study also demonstrate variations among students. Some students actively contribute during discussions, while others require additional guidance because they are less confident or have limited understanding of the material.

This indicates that discussion methods require effective teacher facilitation to ensure that all students benefit from collaborative learning. The variations found among students highlight that instructional strategies should not be based on the assumption that students have fixed learning styles. Although teachers may provide visual explanations, oral narratives, and interactive activities, these approaches should be understood as diverse learning opportunities rather than attempts to match instruction with specific visual, auditory, or kinesthetic categories. The learning styles hypothesis has been criticized because empirical evidence does not sufficiently support the idea that students learn better when instruction is matched with their preferred learning styles [21]. Therefore, the use of varied instructional strategies is more appropriately understood as an effort to accommodate different learning needs and increase student engagement. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to understanding SKI learning as a process of meaning construction involving cognitive processing, social interaction, and contextual interpretation. The strategies implemented by teachers demonstrate that effective SKI learning requires integration between instructional media, narrative approaches, and collaborative learning environments. Learning media supports information organization, storytelling provides historical meaning, and discussion facilitates knowledge construction through interaction [22].

From a practical perspective, this study suggests that SKI teachers should design learning experiences that balance factual knowledge and historical interpretation. Teachers can utilize multimedia to organize complex historical information, storytelling to contextualize historical events, and discussion activities to encourage students' active participation. However, these strategies should be accompanied by continuous assessment to identify students who still experience difficulties and to provide appropriate instructional support [23]. Therefore, the role of PAI teachers in SKI learning extends beyond delivering historical information. Teachers function as learning designers who select appropriate strategies, create meaningful learning experiences, and facilitate students in interpreting Islamic historical narratives. The findings indicate that effective SKI learning is achieved not through a single instructional method but through the integration of various approaches that respond to the complexity of historical materials and the

diversity of students' learning needs.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Improving Students' Understanding of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) Materials

The findings of this study reveal that the process of improving students' understanding of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) materials at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan is influenced by both supporting and inhibiting factors. The supporting factors identified include the availability of adequate learning facilities, students' learning interest, and the teacher's ability to utilize instructional resources effectively. Meanwhile, the inhibiting factors are related to differences in students' learning needs, variations in prior knowledge, classroom diversity, and the complexity of historical materials that require students to process chronological and conceptual information.

The availability of adequate school facilities, particularly projectors, classrooms, and learning media, was found to support teachers in implementing more interactive SKI learning. However, the importance of facilities should not be understood merely as the availability of technological equipment, but rather as how teachers transform these facilities into meaningful learning experiences. This finding supports previous research stating that learning facilities and infrastructure contribute to creating conducive learning environments that facilitate effective interaction between teachers, students, and learning material [24]. Adequate facilities allow teachers to present historical information through various representations, making complex materials such as historical timelines, figures, and events easier for students to organize and understand.

From the perspective of multimedia learning theory proposed by Mayer, the effectiveness of instructional media depends not only on the existence of visual technology but also on how information is structured and presented to support students' cognitive processes. In SKI learning, historical materials often contain large amounts of interconnected information, including names of figures, political developments, locations, and chronological sequences. Without appropriate instructional support, students may experience cognitive overload because they must simultaneously remember and organize various historical facts. Therefore, multimedia presentations, such as PowerPoint slides containing timelines, images, and key concepts, function as cognitive scaffolding that assists students in selecting, organizing, and integrating information into their existing knowledge structures.

This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing that appropriate learning media can increase students' attention, engagement, and comprehension because media provides clearer representations of learning materials [16], [17]. However, this study also indicates that learning media alone does not automatically produce deeper understanding. Students

may remain passive if media is only used as a substitute for textbooks or as a presentation tool dominated by teacher explanation. Therefore, the effectiveness of learning media depends on teachers' pedagogical ability to encourage students to analyze, question, and interpret historical information. Another supporting factor identified in this study is students' learning interest and engagement during SKI learning. Students who showed attention during explanations, participated in discussions, and completed learning tasks tended to demonstrate better understanding of historical materials. This finding is aligned with Slameto's perspective that learning interest influences students' attention, motivation, and willingness to engage with learning activities [25]. However, students' interest should not be viewed as a fixed characteristic, but rather as something that can be influenced by classroom experiences, instructional approaches, and the relevance of learning materials.

The relationship between facilities, instructional strategies, and student engagement also supports previous research indicating that learning environments, instructional media, and appropriate teaching methods contribute to increasing students' motivation and participation in learning activities [28]. In the context of SKI learning, students' engagement becomes particularly important because historical materials require more than memorization. Students need opportunities to interpret events, understand relationships between historical developments, and construct meaning from historical narratives. Nevertheless, this study also identified several challenges that influence the effectiveness of SKI learning. One important challenge is the diversity of students' learning needs within the classroom. The teacher explained that students have different levels of readiness, ways of processing information, and levels of participation. However, these differences should not be interpreted through the traditional concept of fixed learning styles, such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic categories. Although the learning styles model has been widely discussed in education, empirical evidence supporting the idea that matching teaching methods with specific learning styles improves learning outcomes remains limited [21].

Therefore, the variation among students in this study is better understood through the concept of learning preferences, learning needs, and student engagement. Some students may benefit from visual representations because historical information becomes easier to organize, while others may require oral explanation, questioning, collaborative activities, or repeated explanations. These differences do not indicate that students belong to permanent categories, but rather demonstrate that effective teaching requires multiple forms of representation and interaction [26]. The complexity of SKI materials also becomes an inhibiting factor in students' understanding. Historical topics such as the Umayyad Dynasty involve many names, dates,

political developments, and interconnected events. Some students in this study still experienced difficulties in remembering chronological relationships even after teachers implemented various strategies. This finding represents a negative case that is important to discuss because it shows that the use of varied teaching strategies does not automatically result in equal understanding among all students. Differences in prior knowledge, reading habits, cognitive readiness, and learning experiences may influence how students interpret historical information [27].

This finding is consistent with historical learning research which emphasizes that students often experience difficulties when history is presented merely as a collection of facts that must be memorized. [28] explains that historical understanding requires interpretation, contextualization, and reasoning rather than simple recall of information. Therefore, SKI teachers need to move beyond factual transmission by helping students understand historical relationships, causes, consequences, and meanings behind events. The teacher's response to these challenges through varied instructional strategies reflects the principles of differentiated instruction. Rather than applying one method for all students, teachers provide multiple opportunities for students to engage with materials through presentations, storytelling, questioning, and discussion activities. This approach is consistent with constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that students construct knowledge through interaction between new information, previous understanding, and social learning experiences [20]. From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute to understanding that students' comprehension of SKI materials is influenced by the interaction between environmental factors, instructional strategies, and learner characteristics. Facilities provide learning opportunities, teaching strategies facilitate cognitive processing, while students' engagement determines how effectively information is interpreted and retained. Thus, improving SKI learning outcomes requires an integrated approach rather than relying on a single factor.

Practically, this study suggests several implications for SKI teachers and educational institutions. Schools need to maintain and develop learning facilities that support interactive learning environments. However, investment in technology should be accompanied by teacher development programs focusing on effective instructional design. Teachers should not only use media as presentation tools but also integrate activities that encourage analysis, discussion, and reflection. Furthermore, teachers need to conduct continuous assessment to identify students who experience difficulties and provide additional instructional support. The existence of students who still struggle with historical chronology indicates the importance of remedial activities, reinforcement strategies, and contextual learning approaches. By considering students' diverse learning

needs and maintaining high levels of engagement, SKI learning can become more meaningful and accessible for all students. Therefore, the supporting and inhibiting factors identified in this study demonstrate that students' understanding of Islamic Cultural History is shaped by a dynamic interaction between school resources, teacher competence, instructional strategies, and student engagement. Effective SKI learning is not merely determined by the availability of facilities or the selection of teaching methods but by how these components are integrated to create meaningful historical learning experiences.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that students' understanding of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) materials at Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan is reflected in their ability to explain historical events, identify important figures, describe developments in Islamic civilization, and interpret values contained in historical narratives. However, students' understanding is not uniform. While most students demonstrate the ability to reconstruct historical information, some students still experience difficulties in remembering chronological sequences, identifying relationships between events, and organizing complex historical information. These findings indicate that students' comprehension of SKI materials is a dynamic process influenced by cognitive readiness, prior knowledge, learning experiences, and engagement during the learning process.

The study also shows that PAI teachers employ several instructional strategies to facilitate students' understanding of SKI materials, including the use of learning media, storytelling methods, and group discussion activities. Learning media, particularly PowerPoint presentations and projectors, function as supporting tools that help students organize historical information through visual representations. Storytelling provides contextual and meaningful narratives that assist students in understanding historical processes, while group discussions create opportunities for students to exchange ideas, explain concepts, and construct knowledge collaboratively. These findings do not demonstrate that these strategies directly increase students' understanding, but rather illustrate how teachers design learning experiences and how students perceive these approaches as helpful in accessing SKI materials.

The findings further indicate that the implementation of SKI learning is influenced by supporting and inhibiting factors. Adequate school facilities, students' learning interest, and teachers' ability to utilize instructional resources serve as supporting conditions for more interactive learning processes. Meanwhile, differences in students' learning needs, variations in prior knowledge, classroom diversity, and the complexity of historical materials become challenges that influence how

students understand SKI content. Therefore, the effectiveness of SKI learning cannot be attributed solely to teaching methods or learning facilities, but should be understood through the interaction between instructional strategies, learning environments, and students' individual conditions.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding that SKI learning involves processes of knowledge construction, interpretation, and reflection rather than merely the transmission of historical facts. The findings support constructivist perspectives that emphasize the importance of active engagement, social interaction, and meaningful learning experiences. Furthermore, the study highlights that instructional variation should be understood as an effort to accommodate diverse learning needs and increase student engagement rather than as an application of fixed learning style categories, considering the limited empirical support for the learning styles matching hypothesis.

Practically, the findings suggest that SKI teachers need to continue developing learning activities that integrate historical explanation, contextual storytelling, multimedia representation, and collaborative interaction. Schools also need to provide adequate learning facilities while supporting teachers in developing pedagogical skills for effective instructional design. Continuous assessment is necessary to identify students who experience difficulties and to provide appropriate support, such as reinforcement activities, contextual explanations, and additional learning opportunities.

This study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted in only one educational institution, namely Al-Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School Medan, so the findings primarily describe the learning context of that particular school and cannot be generalized to all SKI learning environments. Second, the study focused on teachers' strategies and participants' perceptions of SKI learning processes rather than measuring changes in students' understanding through experimental or longitudinal approaches. Third, the data were primarily obtained through qualitative observations and interviews, which may reflect participants' subjective experiences and interpretations.

Future research is recommended to examine SKI learning through broader contexts involving multiple schools with different characteristics. Further studies may also employ quantitative, mixed-method, or longitudinal designs to investigate the relationship between instructional strategies and students' learning outcomes more systematically. In addition, future research can explore how specific instructional approaches, such as digital media integration, storytelling-based learning, or collaborative learning models, influence students' historical reasoning, conceptual understanding, and ability to interpret Islamic historical values. Thus, subsequent studies can provide deeper evidence regarding effective approaches for facilitating meaningful SKI learning.

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