



Teacher Creativity and Adaptive Strategies for Diverse Learning Styles in Islamic Religious Education: A Case Study of a Pesantren-Based Vocational School

*Nisfi Lailatul Sa'diyah^{1,a}, Mohammad Dasuki^{2,b}

^{1,2}Department of Islamic Education, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, Universitas Al-Falah As-Sunniah, Jember, East Java, Indonesia

^anisfilailatul355@gmail.com, ^b2116068505@inaifas.ac.id

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*Correspondence Author:

nisfilailatul355@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigates the creativity of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in adapting teaching strategies to students' diverse learning styles at SMK Darul Muqomah Gumukmas during the 2024/2025 academic year. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations and in-depth interviews with two PAI teachers and fifteen students representing visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles. Findings indicate that teachers synergized method-based and media-based adaptations; for example, kinesthetic learners were engaged through role-playing simulations of religious narratives, supported by digital animation, while visual learners benefited from slides and hand-drawn illustrations. Despite these efforts, challenges such as limited time, resources, and digital competence persisted. The novelty of this study lies in examining the intersection of learning-style theory, creative pedagogy, and Islamic religious instruction within the under-researched context of vocational education integrated with pesantren values. Based on these findings, it is recommended that professional development programs emphasize technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) tailored for Islamic education, enabling teachers to creatively integrate digital tools with religious content while addressing diverse learner needs.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) holds a strategic and multidimensional role in shaping the character, personality, and morality of students across all educational levels, including vocational high schools (SMK). As a subject, PAI transcends the mere transfer of religious knowledge; it serves as a primary medium for internalizing moral, ethical, and

spiritual values essential for navigating the complexities of modern life. This mandate is enshrined in Indonesia's Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which articulates the goal of developing students' potential to become individuals who are faithful, pious, of noble character, and equipped with necessary life skills. Consequently, effective PAI instruction must extend beyond cognitive acquisition

to actively instill religious values and attitudes pertinent to the younger generation in a globalized era (Busa, 2023; Sahin, 2018).

However, a significant challenge persists in the practical implementation of PAI. At SMK Darul Muqomah Gumukmas, for instance, despite educators' efforts to employ a variety of teaching methods, many students exhibit signs of disengagement including boredom, inattention, and lack of participation. This suggests that methodological variety alone is an insufficient condition for fostering student motivation. The core issue appears to be a pedagogical misalignment: while teachers may utilize diverse approaches, these strategies are not systematically tailored to accommodate the individual learning style preferences (visual, auditory, or kinesthetic) of the students. This lack of adaptation results in a segment of the student body feeling unaccommodated, thereby diminishing their motivation and overall participation in PAI lessons (Rindiantika, 2022). This situation underscores the critical need for learning strategies that are not only diverse but also creatively and deliberately adapted to students' individual learning needs.

The theoretical foundation for addressing this issue is rooted in the concept of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2014), which emphasizes the modification of teaching content, process, product, and learning environment in response to student readiness, interest, and learning profile. While the empirical debate on the efficacy of matching instruction to learning styles continues

(Pashler et al., 2009), the framework remains profoundly influential in educational practice. Teachers worldwide continue to leverage the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (VAK) model as a practical heuristic for planning more engaging and inclusive lessons (Alamin & Missouri, 2023). A perceived mismatch between teaching methods and a student's preferred style can hinder engagement and knowledge retention (Rasiani et al., 2025).

Emerging research indicates that aligning pedagogical strategies with students' learning preferences can significantly enhance educational outcomes. Recent studies argue that interactive, cooperative learning models like Teams Games Tournament (TGT) are particularly effective in IRE/PAI as they engage multiple sensory modalities, thereby catering to a diverse range of learners. This aligns with global scholarship on pedagogical innovation, which posits that teacher creativity—manifested through the use of varied methods, relevant media, and technology integration—is a key driver of learning effectiveness (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Alhumaid, 2019). Although prior research has emphasized the importance of both creativity and learning styles, scant attention has been paid to how these two dimensions are integrated in the daily practice of PAI teachers, especially within the unique context of pesantren-based vocational schools. This context, which blends national curriculum with traditional Islamic values, remains largely underexplored (Memon, 2019).

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the forms of creative teaching employed

by PAI teachers to address diverse learning styles at SMK Darul Muqomah Gumukmas during the 2024/2025 academic year. The research focuses on exploring the specific strategies, methods, and media teachers use to respond to VAK diversity and examines the perceived impact on student motivation and comprehension. By shifting the focus from solely measuring outcomes to understanding the instructional processes and contextual challenges, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive picture of adaptive teaching practices. The findings are expected to serve as a valuable reference for PAI teachers seeking to improve the quality of adaptive and contextual learning.

Previous studies provide a foundation for this inquiry. Aditomo (2024) found that creative strategies involving interactive discussions and visual media can heighten student interest and engagement. Similarly, Ghozali and Irawan (2024) demonstrated that technology integration, such as multimedia-based presentations, strengthens conceptual understanding in PAI. Furthermore, research by Cornelia et al. (2024) on experiential learning highlighted the importance of direct experiences, particularly for kinesthetic learners. Conversely, other studies on PAI have identified a primary challenge: a persistent lack of variation and innovation, with many teachers still reliant on lecture-based methods despite student demand for more interactive and personalized instruction (Faqihuddin & Muflih, 2024). In conclusion, the pedagogical integration of creative teaching based on learning

style considerations represents an urgent necessity in secondary-level PAI education. This need is particularly acute at the vocational level, where student characteristics are distinct, and further amplified by the unique context of SMK Darul Muqomah. As an institution that operates within a pesantren environment, it embodies a dual identity, merging the national curriculum with Islamic boarding school values and traditions. This setting presents distinct challenges and opportunities for PAI teachers, who must creatively adapt their pedagogy to diverse learning styles while remaining anchored in religious values. It is within this underexplored educational model that this research finds its particular significance, aiming to illuminate the intersection of creative pedagogy, learning style theory, and Islamic education.

METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative case study design to obtain an in-depth and contextualized understanding of pedagogical practices within a real-life educational setting. This approach is particularly suited for investigating complex phenomena where the context is integral to the understanding of the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study was deemed appropriate as it allows for a holistic exploration of how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers conceptualize and implement teaching strategies in response to diverse student learning styles within the unique, bounded system of a pesantren-based vocational school.

The research was conducted at SMK Darul Muqomah Gumukmas, Jember

Regency, Indonesia, during the 2024/2025 academic year. This institution was selected due to its distinctive identity as a vocational school integrated within an Islamic boarding school (pesantren) environment, presenting a unique context for examining pedagogical adaptation.

To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. The participants included two PAI teachers (referred to as Teacher A and Teacher B), the curriculum coordinator (Administrator C), and fifteen students. The students were selected to represent the spectrum of learning styles and are referred to as Student 1–V (visual), Student 2–A (auditory), Student 3–K (kinesthetic), and so forth. Participants were selected via purposive sampling. The teachers were chosen based on their recognized efforts and reputation for employing varied instructional methods. Students were identified based on their dominant learning style, as determined by a preliminary VAK (Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic) questionnaire, a commonly used framework in educational practice despite ongoing debates about its empirical validation (Pashler et al., 2009).

Data were gathered through three primary methods to ensure methodological triangulation: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

Classroom observations followed a non-participant protocol, conducted five times for each teacher. Each observation session encompassed two complete lesson periods. An observation protocol guided the documentation of teacher strategies, student engagement levels, interaction

patterns, and utilization of instructional media.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both teachers, the administrator, and all fifteen student participants. Interviews ranged from approximately thirty to sixty minutes in duration. Interview protocols were designed to elicit detailed accounts of participant experiences, perceptions of effective pedagogy, challenges in adapting to diverse learning styles, and reflections on integrating pesantren values into instructional practice.

Document analysis involved the collection and examination of relevant artifacts including lesson plans, teaching materials, student work samples, and instructional media employed in Islamic Religious Education classes. These documents provided corroborating evidence and enriched understanding of the relationship between planned and enacted curriculum.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), involving three concurrent processes: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing with verification.

The data condensation process commenced with verbatim transcription of audio recordings following each observation and interview session. Raw data from transcripts and field notes underwent repeated reading and inductive coding to identify emergent themes relevant to the research questions.

For data display, the condensed information was organized into structured matrices and thematic charts. This organization facilitated systematic

comparison of instructional strategies across different educators and examination of responses from students representing various learning style preferences.

The conclusion drawing and verification phase involved developing and refining tentative conclusions through iterative engagement with the data. Interpretations were validated through triangulation across multiple data sources, with reflexive memoing employed throughout to critically examine researcher positionality and potential biases.

The rigor of this study was ensured by addressing Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria through several established methodological safeguards. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation, member checking with participants to verify interpretations, and peer debriefing with fellow researchers. Transferability was enhanced by providing thick, detailed descriptions of the research context and participant characteristics. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting all research decisions and processes. Confirmability was established through reflexive journaling to bracket researcher biases and by ensuring all findings were grounded in and supported by the raw data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' Creativity in Adaptive Teaching Methods

Classroom observations and interviews indicated that teachers employed creative approaches by integrating multiple teaching methods to

address students' diverse learning styles. Teacher A regularly utilized small group discussions to foster active participation, noting:

"Discussion methods make students who are usually quiet more confident to share their ideas." (Teacher A, Interview, May 2024)

Supporting this, field notes documented that during a group discussion, Student 2-A, who was typically passive, became engaged by nodding and offering brief verbal responses to peers.

Similarly, Teacher B highlighted the value of role-playing for kinesthetic learners, stating:

"Kinesthetic students understand better when they practice directly, not just listen. For example, in prayer practice, they must perform the movements rather than only hear the explanation." (Teacher B, Interview, May 2024)

This approach was evident during an observed lesson on worship practices, where kinesthetic learners such as Student 3-K actively performed physical movements and displayed greater enthusiasm compared to during lecture-based instruction.

In addition to discussions and role-playing, both teachers continued to use lectures, particularly for introducing new concepts. However, they consciously shortened lectures and balanced them with interactive activities to sustain student attention.

Teachers' Creativity in Strategic Use of Media

Teachers also exhibited creativity through their selection and use of instructional media. Teacher A frequently

used simple tools such as whiteboards, hand-drawn visuals, and flashcards to support visual learners. She explained:

“Even though the facilities are limited, simple drawings or cards can make students more enthusiastic to join the lesson.” (Teacher A, Interview, May 2024)

Field notes confirmed that during one lesson, Teacher A illustrated a flowchart on the whiteboard to explain prayer procedures. Student 1-V (a visual learner) was observed attentively copying the diagram and later used it to answer questions.

In contrast, Teacher B incorporated digital media, including slideshows and interactive presentations, to capture student interest. He noted:

“Even if not all teachers are used to technology, I try to use slides or digital apps so that students feel more interested.” (Teacher B, Interview, May 2024)

During an observation, Teacher B projected an animated video depicting Islamic stories, after which several previously quiet students, including Student 2-A, became more responsive by asking follow-up questions.

Both teachers agreed that varying media was essential to reduce monotony and maintain student engagement, despite ongoing technological limitations.

Students' Responses to Teachers' Strategies

Student responses varied based on the alignment between instructional strategies, media, and individual learning preferences. During group discussions, auditory learners such as Student 2-A demonstrated greater engagement through

nodding, providing brief affirmations, and posing questions. The student remarked:

“It's easier to remember when we talk about it together rather than just listening to the teacher explain.” (Student 2-A, Interview, May 2024)

Visual learners benefited significantly from diagrams and visual aids. Student 1-V commented:

“When Teacher A drew the steps on the board, I understood faster than if it was only explained verbally.” (Student 1-V, Interview, May 2024)

Kinesthetic learners, such as Student 3-K, expressed enthusiasm during role-playing and practical activities, stating:

“I like it better when we practice, because I can follow the movement directly.” (Student 3-K, Interview, May 2024)

Observations consistently indicated that student motivation increased when teaching methods corresponded with their dominant learning styles. Conversely, mismatched strategies often resulted in passive behavior or distractions.

Implementation Challenges

Despite institutional support for creative teaching in Islamic Religious Education (PAI), teachers encountered several challenges in accommodating diverse learning styles. Time constraints emerged as a primary obstacle, as teachers struggled to address all learning preferences within limited sessions (Teacher A). Limited facilities also restricted instructional flexibility; although the school provided basic tools such as whiteboards, cards, and simple modules, access to advanced digital media remained inadequate.

Varying levels of technological proficiency among teachers further

hindered effective integration of digital tools. While some educators adapted readily to Learning Management Systems and online resources, others required additional training and time to use technology effectively (Teacher B).

Additionally, heterogeneous classrooms with differing student motivation levels posed another challenge. Even with creative strategies, some students remained disengaged due to personal or environmental factors, and high student-teacher ratios limited opportunities for individualized guidance (Saputri et al., 2025). These challenges underscore the gap between the aspiration for personalized, technology-enhanced learning and the practical constraints of time, resources, and skills. Nevertheless, teachers persisted in employing adaptive strategies, combining simple tools with gradual technology integration, reflecting a commitment to meaningful PAI instruction (Rasiani, 2025). Research suggests that overcoming these barriers—particularly through targeted professional development and technological empowerment—can optimize creative teaching and foster interactive, personalized, and collaborative learning environments (Mohd et al., 2024; Abd Majid et al., 2025; Alhumaid et al., 2023).

Discussion

Teachers' Creativity in Adaptive Teaching Methods

The findings reveal that PAI teachers at SMK Darul Muqomah Gumukmas combined various teaching methods including lectures, group discussions, and role-playing to engage students with diverse learning styles. This

supports Rahmayanti et al. (2024), who emphasized that experiential learning methods foster active participation, particularly when students are directly involved in knowledge construction. However, whereas Rahmayanti et al. focused primarily on learning outcomes, the present study highlights teachers' decision-making processes in selecting methods tailored to specific learning styles.

For instance, Teacher A's use of small group discussions to engage auditory learners demonstrates a deliberate adaptation strategy, consistent with Beghetto and Kaufman's (2014) assertion that pedagogical creativity involves context-sensitive modifications. Similarly, Teacher B's incorporation of role-playing for kinesthetic learners reflects an intentional alignment with students' experiential needs, extending the findings of Hidayat et al. (2018) on the effectiveness of interactive models in Islamic Religious Education.

Thus, this study contributes to the literature by illustrating that creative teaching in PI involves not merely method diversification, but the strategic alignment of methods with students' learning preferences within the unique context of pesantren-based vocational education.

Teachers' Creativity in Strategic Use of Media

The findings indicate that both traditional and digital media play vital roles in supporting diverse learning styles. Teacher A's use of simple visuals aligns with Saputri et al (2025), who found that visual aids help concretize abstract religious concepts. This study extends

their conclusion by demonstrating how low-resource strategies can effectively foster engagement when applied thoughtfully.

Teacher B's use of digital tools resonates with Ghozali and Irawan (2024), who highlighted the motivational benefits of interactive digital platforms. However, unlike prior research focusing primarily on technology integration, this study emphasizes the adaptive rationale behind media selection—choosing tools not for novelty, but for their alignment with specific learning styles.

This research contributes by demonstrating that effective media use in Islamic Religious Education depends less on technological sophistication and more on teachers' creativity in adapting both traditional and digital tools to accommodate cognitive diversity within pesantren-based vocational schools.

Students' Responses to Teachers' Strategies

The evidence that students responded more positively when instruction matched their learning styles reinforces Dunn and Price (1980) framework on differentiated instruction. This study contributes qualitative classroom evidence from the under-researched context of Islamic Religious Education in vocational settings. Unlike quantitative prior research, this study documents moment-to-moment shifts in student behavior and perceptions in response to aligned teaching strategies.

For example, auditory learners' engagement during discussions confirms the value of dialogic learning, while extending it by showing how modest

adaptations such as balancing teacher talk with peer dialogue can enhance attentiveness. Similarly, kinesthetic learners' enthusiasm during role-playing supports experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), but this study emphasizes teacher creativity in embedding such practices within traditionally lecture-centered religious instruction.

In summary, the findings highlight that student engagement serves not only as an outcome but also as a diagnostic tool for refining instructional strategies in PAI classrooms.

Implementation Challenges

This study reveals that despite institutional support for creativity in PAI instruction, several implementation challenges reflect tensions between pedagogical ideals and practical constraints. Time constraints limit teachers' capacity to address diverse learning styles, echoing findings that heterogeneous classrooms require strategic prioritization of methods (Saputri et al., 2025; Wiguna, et al., 2024).

Resource and infrastructural limitations further constrain innovation. Although basic tools and LMS access are available, limited advanced digital media and uneven teacher technological proficiency—as noted by Tondeur et al., (2022)—impede full technology integration.

Theoretical perspectives from Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory help interpret these challenges. Partial technology adoption reflects issues of compatibility with existing practices, perceived complexity, and limited

trialability, all influencing innovation effectiveness (Alhumaid et al., 2023).

Student-related factors, including varying motivation levels and high student–teacher ratios, present additional barriers, underscoring the need for differentiated guidance. This aligns with literature emphasizing that technology and innovative pedagogy can facilitate personalized, interactive, and collaborative learning (Zuber et al., 2025).

Overall, overcoming these challenges requires multifaceted strategies: targeted professional development, strategic resource allocation, and pedagogically informed innovation adoption. Such measures can bridge the gap between teachers' creative intentions and the realities of PAI instruction, promoting more effective, student-centered learning.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the creativity of PAI teachers at SMK Darul Muqomah is characterized by a dynamic, adaptive process of method and media selection aimed at aligning instruction with diverse learning styles. The findings reveal that effective adaptation is less about technological sophistication and more about pedagogical intent; both simple and digital media were effective when deployed strategically to meet specific learner needs. Teachers' deliberate combination of discussions, role plays, question-and-answer sessions, practical worship activities, and various media facilitated greater student engagement and understanding, even within resource-constrained environments.

The study contributes to the theory of learning styles by illustrating its practical application and limitations in a specific, under-researched cultural context, showing that while alignment enhances engagement, it cannot fully address low intrinsic motivation among some students. It also provides practical insights for PAI teachers by offering concrete, adaptable strategies to overcome infrastructural and temporal constraints, and fills a gap in the literature by presenting an empirical account of pedagogical practices in a pesantren-based vocational school in Indonesia.

Future research could conduct a multi-site case study comparing PAI teaching strategies in general, vocational, and religiously-oriented schools to identify context-specific challenges and innovations. A mixed-methods study is recommended to quantitatively measure the correlation between specific adaptive strategies, such as the percentage of lesson time spent on kinesthetic activities, and improvements in learning outcomes or motivation scores among different learner types. Additionally, given the challenges of technological mastery identified in this study, future investigations should explore the effectiveness of targeted professional development programs designed to enhance PAI teachers' Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK).

Ultimately, this research affirms that in the face of diverse learners and logistical constraints, teacher creativity remains the most critical component for creating meaningful and effective Islamic Religious Education.

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