



Analyzing Constructive Alignment in Islamic Religious Education Learning Design for HOTS Integration at SMAN 17 Surabaya

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ABSTRACT

This research is motivated by the demand for the development of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, which has not been fully implemented optimally, particularly in terms of the alignment of learning design. This study aims to analyze PAI learning design based on constructive alignment and examine the alignment between learning objectives, learning activities, and assessments in supporting HOTS at SMAN 17 Surabaya. This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study. Data were collected through interviews with one PAI teacher and documentation studies of 3 teaching modules and related learning tools. The results show that the learning design has oriented towards the principle of constructive alignment, but its implementation is still partial, mainly due to limited teacher competence in designing HOTS-based assessments and the dominance of traditional teaching practices. Learning objectives reflect HOTS, but activities and assessments do not fully support it. For example, some learning objectives require students to “analyze” social deviant behavior (C4 level), while the corresponding learning activities only ask students to “explain” concepts through lecture and simple discussion, and the assessment items mainly measure understanding using multiple-choice and short-answer questions. This indicates a clear misalignment between intended outcomes, instructional activities, and assessment practices. As a result, HOTS development is not optimally achieved. This study emphasizes the importance of designing learning in an integrative and aligned manner, as well as strengthening teacher capacity in developing HOTS-oriented activities and assessments to ensure effective learning outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of 21st-century education demands a shift in the learning paradigm from merely transferring knowledge to developing higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), which encompass analytical, evaluation, and creative abilities (Putri et al., 2024). In the context of national education, this demand aligns with curriculum policy

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that emphasizes strengthening 21st-century competencies (Hamidalloh & Hamdani, 2025). However, in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching practices, learning orientation remains dominated by lower-order thinking skills, such as memorizing concepts, understanding definitions, and reproducing religious material textually. This situation reveals a gap between curriculum demands and classroom implementation, particularly in developing students' critical and reflective thinking skills in understanding Islamic values (Hamzah et al., 2025; Jaeni et al., 2025; Listari et al., 2026).

These issues extend beyond learning methods to a more fundamental aspect: learning design. Teachers often develop learning objectives, activities, and assessments separately without considering their logical relationships. Consequently, even when objectives are formulated at the HOTS level, learning activities remain conventional, and assessment instruments fail to adequately measure higher-order thinking skills (Hanifah & Huda, 2026; Putri et al., 2024). This lack of synchronicity indicates a misalignment in learning design, which reduces learning effectiveness in achieving desired objectives.

In response, the concept of constructive alignment developed by Biggs offers a systematic approach that aligns learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment tasks (Biggs, 1996; Hamdoun, 2023; Purba et al., 2025; Rouffet et al., 2023). This approach emphasizes that learning success depends not only on the quality of each component but also on the degree of alignment among them. In the PAI context, constructive alignment is crucial because it enables the simultaneous integration of Islamic values with the development of higher-order thinking skills.

However, several assumptions require critical examination. First, constructive alignment is often assumed to automatically improve students' HOTS, whereas its effectiveness depends heavily on implementation quality (Hristov et al., 2023). Second, PAI learning is often considered normatively oriented and therefore less compatible with HOTS development, even though conceptually the two can be integrated (Fitriyah & Lilawati, 2024). Third, there is an assumption that teachers understand and apply alignment principles in learning design, yet various inconsistencies between learning components persist (Aswati, 2025).

Several previous studies have examined innovative learning models such as problem-based and project-based learning for improving students' HOTS (Ainun et al.,

2025; Musyawir et al., 2022; Novanto et al., 2025). Fitroni et al. (2024) found that project-based learning can improve HOTS when designed systematically and integrated with objectives, activities, and evaluation. Putri et al. (2024) showed that although teachers have integrated HOTS into PAI lesson plans, implementation remains limited because activities and evaluations are not fully supportive. Similarly, Alfaizinun & Lilawati (2023) found that HOTS-based PAI learning at Jogoroto State Senior High School faces obstacles, particularly in evaluation, which is not yet capable of optimally measuring HOTS. Fitriyah & Lilawati (2024) showed that HOTS-based Islamic Education can improve students' higher-order thinking abilities.

However, none of these studies explicitly analyze the alignment between learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment tasks using Biggs' three-component constructive alignment framework within a single PAI classroom context. Consequently, empirical evidence on how alignment operates as an integrated instructional system in PAI learning remains limited. Most existing studies emphasize learning methods without deeply examining the overall structure of learning design.

In this study, learning design is defined as an integrated instructional system that systematically connects learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment tasks to achieve intended outcomes. This concept differs from learning methods, which refer to specific instructional strategies or techniques used during teaching. Research on constructive alignment shows that alignment between objectives, activities, and assessments improves learning quality, but these studies are generally conducted in higher education or general subject areas. Meanwhile, PAI research tends to focus on value internalization and has not explicitly integrated HOTS development within a systematic learning design framework. Thus, the integration of constructive alignment and HOTS reinforcement in the PAI context remains an open research area.

This research addresses gaps in learning implementation in local contexts while responding to global discourse on the limitations of implementing constructive alignment in non-Western, values-based educational settings. Previous studies have shown that constructive alignment has been extensively developed and tested in Western higher education contexts, focusing on cognitive rationality and academic performativity (Biggs, 1996). However, its application in values-based settings like PAI presents unique

challenges. In the Indonesian context, PAI learning targets not only cognitive achievement but also spiritual attitudes and moral values—abstract domains not easily translated into observable activities or measurable assessments. This makes alignment more complex, particularly when teachers must assess students' religious attitudes and character, demonstrating that constructive alignment in PAI requires contextual adaptation rather than direct adoption.

Strengthening HOTS in global education is often positioned within the framework of universal 21st-century skills (Brookhart, 2010; Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). However, integrating HOTS into values-based and religious education presents epistemological challenges, particularly in balancing critical thinking development with the internalization of normative values (Halstead, 2007). This suggests a conceptual and empirical gap between HOTS-based learning design and religious educational contexts.

Furthermore, although numerous studies have examined HOTS implementation or innovative learning models, most have focused on learning methods rather than on the quality of alignment between objectives, activities, and assessments as a unified instructional system (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Haolader et al., 2015; Listari et al., 2026). Thus, empirical evidence regarding the level of constructive alignment in classroom practices, particularly in secondary education and Islamic educational contexts, remains very limited.

Based on this, the present study contributes to global discourse by: (1) examining the application of constructive alignment in non-Western and religious value-based educational contexts, (2) analyzing HOTS integration in PAI learning as a form of values-based education, and (3) providing empirical evidence regarding the quality of alignment in learning practices at the secondary school level.

Theoretically, this research rests on three main foundations. First, constructive alignment theory emphasizes the importance of alignment between learning objectives, learning activities, and assessments as a prerequisite for effective learning (Hristov et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2024). Second, HOTS theory, based on Anderson and Krathwohl's revised Bloom's taxonomy, classifies higher-order thinking skills into analysis, evaluation, and creation (Putri et al., 2024; Tungga et al., 2025). Third, the integrative nature of PAI learning, encompassing cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects,

necessitates a learning design approach that focuses not only on cognitive outcomes but also on the formation of attitudes and values (Hoeruman et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2025). These three frameworks serve as complementary analytical lenses. HOTS taxonomy examines the cognitive level of learning objectives; constructive alignment analyzes coherence between objectives, activities, and assessment tasks; and the integrative PAI perspective evaluates the extent to which cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions are incorporated within the learning design.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning design based on constructive alignment and to analyze the level of alignment between learning objectives, learning activities, and assessments in a real-life school context. A case study approach was chosen because it enables researchers to examine phenomena holistically and contextually, producing a comprehensive understanding of the learning practices under investigation (Sugiyono, 2016). The qualitative nature of this study aligns with the research aim of exploring meaning, interpretation, and contextual relationships rather than measuring variables or testing causal hypotheses.

The research was conducted at SMAN 17 Surabaya, a public senior high school in East Java, Indonesia. This site was purposively selected because the school has implemented the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes the development of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and requires teachers to design learning that integrates objectives, activities, and assessments systematically. Moreover, the school's Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers had expressed willingness to participate in the study and to provide access to teaching documents. These characteristics made SMAN 17 Surabaya an information-rich case for examining constructive alignment in PAI learning design.

The subjects of this study were PAI teachers at the 10th-grade level who were directly involved in designing and implementing learning. Subject selection was purposive, taking into account the teachers' involvement in developing learning materials, such as teaching modules and student worksheets (LKPD), as well as their experience in

classroom instruction. In addition, the learning documents used by these teachers constituted an important source of data for this study. A single PAI teacher (NB) participated as the key informant, representing the primary designer and implementer of the 10th-grade PAI curriculum at the school. While the involvement of a single teacher limits the generalizability of findings, it allowed for an in-depth, focused analysis of how constructive alignment principles are understood and applied in a specific, authentic classroom context.

Data collection employed two techniques: in-depth semi-structured interviews and documentation studies (Rijali, 2019). This study specifically focused on the analysis of planned learning design rather than classroom implementation. Therefore, direct classroom observation was not included as a data collection method. Instead, the study prioritized document analysis of teaching modules and interviews with teachers to examine how learning objectives, activities, and assessments were designed and aligned.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with the PAI teacher (NB) and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interview protocol covered three main areas: (1) the process of designing learning objectives, activities, and assessments; (2) the teacher's understanding of constructive alignment and HOTS; and (3) challenges encountered in aligning learning components. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken during the interview to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

The documentation study focused specifically on three *Kurikulum Merdeka* teaching modules used in Grade 10 PAI, along with related student worksheets (LKPD) and assessment instruments. These documents were selected because they represent the official learning design prepared by the teacher and approved by the school. The teaching modules covered three topics: (1) social deviant behavior, (2) moral values in daily life, and (3) the concept of *akhlak* (Islamic ethics). A total of 4 learning objectives were extracted from these modules for detailed alignment analysis. Each objective was traced to its corresponding learning activity and assessment task. The documentation enabled direct identification of alignment between learning objectives, learning activities, and assessments as planned.

Data analysis employed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes three stages: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). In the data condensation stage, the researcher selected and focused on data relevant to constructive alignment and HOTS indicators, coding interview transcripts and documents accordingly. Irrelevant or redundant information was filtered out to ensure analytical clarity.

In the data presentation stage, the condensed data were organized into matrices and tables to systematically examine relationships between learning components. Specifically, an analytical matrix was constructed in which each row represented a specific learning objective extracted from the teaching modules, while the columns consisted of: (1) the cognitive level of the objective based on HOTS taxonomy (e.g., C2–C6), (2) the corresponding learning activities designed to achieve the objective, (3) the assessment tasks used to measure student learning, and (4) the level of alignment between these components (categorized as aligned, partially aligned, or misaligned). This matrix enabled the researcher to identify patterns of consistency and inconsistency across learning objectives, activities, and assessments, particularly in determining whether higher-order thinking objectives were supported by appropriate instructional practices.

In the conclusion drawing stage, the researcher interpreted the patterns identified in the matrix to answer the research questions. Conclusions were drawn iteratively, with constant comparison between interview data, document analysis, and theoretical frameworks. The analysis process was cyclical; the researcher moved back and forth between data condensation, presentation, and conclusion drawing until consistent patterns emerged.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source and method triangulation (Arikunto, 1993). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data with the analyzed learning documents. For example, statements made by the teacher about assessment design were cross-checked against actual assessment items in the teaching modules and student worksheets. When discrepancies were found between interview responses and document evidence, priority was given to the documented data, as it reflects the actual instructional design used in practice. The interview data were then used to provide contextual explanations for these inconsistencies.

Method triangulation was conducted by combining interviews and documentation as complementary data collection techniques. This combination allowed the researcher to capture both the teacher's stated intentions (through interviews) and the actual design artifacts (through documents). Member checking was also conducted by confirming the findings with the participant (NB) to ensure that interpretations matched the actual conditions. The participant was provided with a summary of the preliminary findings and asked to verify their accuracy. No significant corrections were requested, confirming the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. The researcher obtained informed consent from the participant prior to data collection. The participant was informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing the participant's identity (referred to as NB) and securely storing all recorded materials. Institutional permission was formally obtained from the school administration before fieldwork commenced.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents empirical findings on how the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning design at SMAN 17 Surabaya is analyzed from the perspective of constructive alignment and the strengthening of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). The findings are derived from interviews with a PAI teacher (NB) and documentation studies of teaching modules and learning tools. The analysis focuses on three main components: learning objectives, learning activities, and assessments, as well as the level of alignment between them. The presentation aims to comprehensively describe how the learning design is structured while identifying the extent to which alignment supports the development of students' higher-order thinking skills.

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Learning Design at SMAN 17 Surabaya

Based on interviews and documentation studies, the PAI learning design at SMAN 17 Surabaya is structured with reference to Learning Outcomes (*Capaian Pembelajaran*, CP), which are then translated into teaching modules. Teachers design learning objectives

by considering curriculum suitability, student characteristics, and the relevance of the material to everyday life. As expressed by teacher (NB):

"I usually formulate learning objectives based on CP, then translate them into indicators in the teaching module, and adapt them to the students' conditions in the classroom." (Interview, 02 April 2026)

Documentation analysis of the teaching modules confirms that the learning materials contain the three main components: learning objectives, learning activities, and assessments. However, further analysis reveals that these three components have not been fully integrated. Teachers tend to develop objectives, activities, and evaluations sequentially rather than concurrently, without systematically checking their interrelationships. This is reinforced by teacher (NB):

"I usually develop objectives first, then activities and evaluations, but I don't always thoroughly check their appropriateness." (Interview, 02 April 2026)

Analysis of Learning Objectives from a HOTS Perspective

The learning objectives in the teaching module have been oriented toward HOTS development. This is shown by the use of operational verbs such as *analyze*, *assess*, and *provide solutions*. In an interview, teacher (NB) stated:

"I usually add verbs like analyze or provide solutions, for example, asking students to analyze deviant behavior in their environment." (Interview, 02 April 2026)

Documentation analysis confirms that objectives are formulated at the analysis level (C4), particularly for topics on morals and social life. However, not all learning objectives consistently meet the HOTS level. In some sections, objectives still focus on understanding basic concepts. Furthermore, although objectives have been designed at the HOTS level, their implementation has not been fully optimized. Teacher (NB) acknowledged:

"Conceptually, they are directed towards critical thinking, but in practice, it is not always optimal." (Interview, 02 April 2026)

Overall, the analysis shows that learning objectives tend to adopt operational verbs associated with higher-order thinking, such as *analyzing* and *evaluating*, but this orientation is not consistently applied across all learning units.

Analysis of Learning Activities to Support HOTS

PAI learning activities at SMAN 17 Surabaya are dominated by lectures, group discussions, and question-and-answer methods. Teachers have attempted to actively engage students through contextual problem-based discussions. Teacher (NB) explained:

"I usually divide students into groups and then give them a case study to discuss, for example, about teenage social interactions." (Interview, 02 April 2026)

Documentation analysis of teaching modules and student worksheets (LKPD) shows the presence of group discussions and simple case analysis activities. These activities have the potential to foster higher-order thinking skills, particularly in analysis and evaluation. However, the implementation tends to remain at a surface level. This is evident in the design of discussion tasks in the student worksheet. For example, one discussion question asks:

"What is meant by deviant behavior in social life?"

This question only requires students to recall or restate definitions (C2 level), rather than engaging in higher-order thinking processes such as analyzing causes, evaluating impacts, or proposing solutions. Thus, although discussion methods are used, the cognitive demand of the tasks remains limited, restricting the development of students' higher-order thinking skills.

Furthermore, the implementation of learning activities has not been fully consistent in promoting HOTS. Some students remain passive and are not yet accustomed to presenting arguments critically. Teacher (NB) admitted:

"I've encouraged them to express their opinions, but many students are still passive or don't dare to." (Interview, 02 April 2026)

Activities requiring students to produce work or solutions independently have not been conducted routinely. Therefore, while learning activities are nominally geared toward HOTS, they have not been systematically structured to optimize student cognitive engagement.

Analysis of Learning Assessments in Measuring HOTS

In terms of evaluation, teachers use various assessment formats, including multiple-choice and essays. Teacher (NB) stated:

"I mostly use multiple-choice and short essays, sometimes I also use materials from the MGMP (Subject Teachers' Conference) or textbooks." (Interview, 02 April 2026)

Documentation analysis of assessment instruments reveals that multiple-choice questions still dominate and are mostly at a low cognitive level. The number of essay questions addressing HOTS remains limited. Teacher (NB) acknowledged these limitations:

"Some are already HOTS-oriented, especially essays, but many multiple-choice questions still lack understanding." (Interview, 02 April 2026)

A discrepancy was also found between learning objectives and evaluation formats. Objectives formulated at the analytical level are not always accompanied by commensurate assessment instruments. Teacher (NB) confirmed:

"Sometimes the objective is analytical, but the questions are still at the understanding level." (Interview, 02 April 2026)

Project-based assessments or case studies have not become routine practices; instead, assessment is generally carried out using multiple-choice and short-answer questions taken from textbooks or existing materials. These assessment types are used more frequently, particularly at the end of lessons or learning units. Consequently, assessment tends to focus on measuring students' conceptual understanding rather than higher-order thinking skills.

Analysis of Constructive Alignment between Learning Components

Analysis of alignment between learning components reveals that the level of constructive alignment in PAI learning at SMAN 17 Surabaya remains partial. Conceptually, teachers have attempted to formulate learning objectives as a basis, then determine activities and evaluations. However, in practice, the relationship between components has not been fully integrated.

The most prominent misalignment is seen in the relationship between learning objectives and assessments. Objectives formulated at the HOTS level are not always supported by aligned activities and evaluations. Teacher (NB) acknowledged this:

"There are often misalignments, for example, the objectives are analytical but the evaluation is still only about understanding." (Interview, 02 April 2026)

Documentation analysis also shows that although the learning tool structure is complete, there is no explicit mechanism to ensure alignment between components. Teacher (NB) identified assessment as the most difficult component to align:

"The most difficult part is evaluation, because creating HOTS questions is quite difficult and time-consuming." (Interview, 02 April 2026)

The overall analysis reveals that the alignment between objectives, activities, and assessments remains partial. For example, although several objectives were categorized as HOTS, only a limited number of corresponding activities and assessment tasks reflected the same cognitive level. This indicates a gap between intended outcomes and actual instructional practices.

Table 1 presents a summary of the alignment analysis across four learning objectives extracted from the teaching modules.

Table 1
Summary of Alignment between Objectives, Activities, and Assessments

Objective	Learning Activity	Assessment	Alignment Status
Analyze deviant social behavior	Lecture and simple discussion	Multiple-choice questions (definition-based)	Not aligned
Evaluate moral values in daily life	Group discussion	Short-answer questions	Partially aligned
Explain the concept of akhlak	Lecture	Multiple-choice questions	Aligned
Propose solutions to social problems	Limited discussion	No specific HOTS-based assessment	Not aligned

As shown in Table 1, out of four learning objectives analyzed, one objective (25%) was categorized as fully aligned, one objective (25%) as partially aligned, and two objectives (50%) as misaligned. These findings indicate that the majority of learning components do not demonstrate full constructive alignment, particularly in the relationship between learning objectives and assessment practices. The most severe misalignment occurs when HOTS-level objectives (e.g., "analyze" and "propose solutions") are paired with low-level activities (lecture, simple discussion) and low-level assessments (definition-based multiple-choice questions or no specific HOTS assessment at all).

Discussion

This section interprets the research findings in relation to theoretical frameworks and previous empirical studies. The discussion is organized into four thematic sections: (1) Islamic Religious Education learning design from a constructive alignment perspective, (2) the appropriateness of learning components to support HOTS, (3)

problems and challenges in implementing constructive alignment in PAI, and (4) theoretical and practical implications for strengthening HOTS in PAI learning.

Theme 1: Islamic Religious Education Learning Design from a Constructive Alignment Perspective

Research findings show that the PAI learning design at SMAN 17 Surabaya structurally adopts the basic pattern of constructive alignment. Similar to findings by Listari et al. (2026), this pattern begins with the formulation of learning objectives, followed by the determination of learning activities, and concludes with the development of evaluations. Administratively, this structure appears to meet systematic learning planning standards. However, upon more critical analysis, the design does not fully represent the essence of constructive alignment as an integrative pedagogical system.

From a theoretical perspective, constructive alignment extends beyond simply placing objectives, activities, and assessments in the same document; it requires a mutually reinforcing functional relationship (Hristov et al., 2023). This means that each learning activity must be directly designed to achieve a specific objective, and each assessment must authentically measure the targeted outcomes. However, the findings indicate that this relationship remains implicit and has not been explicitly designed. Teachers tend to structure learning components linearly rather than integratively (Hanifah & Huda, 2026). Consequently, although teaching modules appear structurally complete, the internal coherence between objectives, activities, and assessments is not consistently ensured (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022). This suggests that constructive alignment implementation remains at a structural level rather than a conceptual one.

The most significant misalignment occurs between learning objectives and assessment practices. Objectives targeting higher-order thinking are not consistently supported by corresponding assessment instruments (Putri et al., 2024). This indicates that alignment has not yet functioned as an integrated system, but rather as separate instructional components. Partial alignment limits learning effectiveness in fostering higher-order thinking skills, as students are not consistently exposed to coherent cognitive demands throughout the learning process (Rachmawati et al., 2023).

This phenomenon reflects a reduction in the meaning of constructive alignment from a conceptual framework to a mere administrative procedure. However, the findings

indicate that alignment is often treated as a procedural sequence, where objectives, activities, and assessments are developed separately without ensuring their functional interconnection.

Consequently, even when documentation appears complete, the learning design cannot guarantee deep learning. This reinforces Putri et al.'s (2024) argument that learning quality is determined not by the completeness of tools but by internal coherence between components. This condition also indicates an epistemological gap between theory and practice. Teachers are familiar with modern learning terms and structures but have not fully internalized the logic behind them. Therefore, the main problem is not a lack of design but a lack of deep understanding of design principles.

These findings align with global criticism of constructive alignment implementation, which tends to be reduced to an administrative procedure rather than an epistemological framework for learning (Biggs, 1996). In international contexts, misalignment often occurs when teachers understand alignment linearly rather than as a mutually reinforcing functional relationship (Haolader et al., 2015). Thus, the phenomenon identified in this study is not a local anomaly but part of a systemic problem in translating theory into practice.

However, this study extends the discussion by demonstrating that in value-based educational contexts such as PAI, the reduction of alignment is caused not only by technical limitations but also by the complexity of integrating cognitive and normative dimensions simultaneously. Alignment in this context requires not only instructional coherence but also epistemic integration between knowledge and values.

Theme 2: Appropriateness of Learning Components to Support HOTS

Learning objectives have shown a tendency toward higher cognitive levels, such as analysis and evaluation (Fitriyah & Lilawati, 2024). This indicates that, conceptually, teachers have attempted to accommodate the demands of 21st-century learning. However, problems arise when these objectives are not accompanied by commensurate activities and assessments. Dominant learning activities, lectures and simple discussions suggest that cognitive processes in the classroom remain at the surface level (Rachmawati et al., 2023).

In this study, *assessment misalignment* refers specifically to the condition in which assessment tasks do not correspond to the cognitive level of the stated learning objectives, particularly when higher-order objectives are assessed using lower-order questions. This concept represents a specific form of misalignment within the broader framework of constructive alignment, which emphasizes the coherence between objectives, learning activities, and assessment tasks.

Even when discussions are implemented, without task designs that demand in-depth exploration, these activities risk becoming merely pedagogical formalities. This is evident in discussion tasks found in student worksheets. For example, a discussion prompt asking, "*Do you agree that deviant behavior should be avoided in social life? Explain briefly,*" does not require students to analyze causes, evaluate consequences, or propose solutions. As a result, student responses tend to remain at the level of personal opinion or simple agreement, indicating that discussion functions more as a procedural activity than as a meaningful learning process.

In line with Jameel et al. (2023), this study found awareness of HOTS-oriented learning design at the conceptual level. However, inconsistencies were identified in the distribution and application of these objectives. Some objectives remain focused on lower cognitive levels, suggesting that HOTS integration is not yet systematically embedded across all learning units. This reflects a partial adoption of HOTS, functioning more as a formal requirement than as a consistently implemented pedagogical orientation.

More critically, the assessment aspect presents a stark contradiction. The dominance of multiple-choice questions at the comprehension level reflects an evaluation orientation still based on the old paradigm of measuring factual knowledge. In learning theory, assessment has a backwash effect, determining the direction of student learning (Putri et al., 2025). When assessments do not demand HOTS, students lack the cognitive incentive to develop these abilities. This creates a paradox in learning design: objectives demand HOTS, but the evaluation system hinders its achievement. Consequently, HOTS in PAI learning remains at the level of curricular rhetoric rather than internalized pedagogical practice. This confirms that HOTS is not merely an attribute of learning objectives but rather the result of a harmonious orchestration of objectives, activities, and assessments.

The mismatch between HOTS objectives and assessment constitutes *assessment misalignment*, a condition where evaluation does not represent the targeted cognitive complexity (Brookhart, 2010; Hamzah et al., 2022). From a constructivist learning theory perspective, this condition hinders deep learning because students do not receive adequate cognitive stimulation to conduct analysis and evaluation (Biggs, 1996). While previous studies emphasize that HOTS integration requires alignment across instructional components (Hamzah et al., 2022), this study reveals that such misalignment persists even when teachers are conceptually aware of HOTS. This challenges the assumption that conceptual understanding automatically leads to pedagogical implementation. Instead, it suggests that HOTS integration is highly dependent on assessment literacy and instructional design competence.

Theme 3: Problems and Challenges of Implementing Constructive Alignment in Islamic Religious Education

Research findings reveal that constructive alignment implementation faces not only technical obstacles but also structural and cultural ones. A major problem lies in teachers' limited competence in designing HOTS-based assessments (Rahman et al., 2026). As Alfaizinun & Lilawati (2023) noted, developing questions that measure analytical, evaluation, and creative skills requires more complex pedagogical skills than memorization-based questions. This suggests that transforming toward HOTS-based learning requires continuous teacher capacity building.

Learning activities are generally dominated by lectures, discussions, and question-and-answer sessions (Hamzah et al., 2022). Although discussion-based activities have the potential to support higher-order thinking, their implementation tends to remain surface-level (Rachmawati et al., 2023). The analysis shows that these activities are not always designed to explicitly engage students in complex cognitive processes such as argument construction, critical evaluation, or problem-solving. Consequently, student participation remains uneven, with some learners actively involved while others remain passive. This indicates that existing activities have not been systematically structured to maximize cognitive engagement.

Student characteristics also play a significant role. Students accustomed to passive learning tend to experience resistance when faced with critical thinking demands. This

creates a pedagogical dilemma: should teachers maintain HOTS standards or adapt to student readiness? In practice, many teachers compromise by reducing learning complexity, which indirectly reinforces the cycle of low student thinking skills.

Cultural factors further contribute to these challenges. The dominance of lecture methods indicates that the learning paradigm remains teacher-centered. Shifting to student-centered learning requires not only a change in methods but also a shift in perspective regarding the roles of teachers and students in the learning process (Fauziyah et al., 2024). Without this paradigm shift, constructive alignment will be difficult to implement optimally.

Furthermore, limited learning time and administrative demands also pose challenges. Teachers face the need to complete material while simultaneously fulfilling various administrative requirements, limiting the space for designing in-depth learning (Setyawan, 2025). This demonstrates that constructive alignment implementation cannot be separated from the broader context of the education system. The emerging issues are complex and interconnected, encompassing aspects of competency, student readiness, learning culture, and the education system.

In contrast to studies conducted in Western educational contexts, where constructive alignment challenges are linked to curriculum design and institutional policy, this study highlights that in Islamic educational settings, cultural learning habits and value transmission orientation play a more dominant role (Suhayib & Ansyari, 2023). Thus, implementing student-centered and cognitively engaging learning cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context of education (Amirudin et al., 2025).

Theme 4: Theoretical and Practical Implications for Strengthening HOTS in Islamic Religious Education Learning

This research strengthens the relevance of constructive alignment as a conceptual framework for designing HOTS-oriented learning. However, the findings also provide a critical nuance: the success of constructive alignment is determined not only by its presence in the design but also by the quality of its implementation. Partial alignment has proven insufficient to produce effective learning. This research broadens the understanding that constructive alignment must be understood as a reflective and ongoing process, not simply a technical procedure.

In the context of PAI learning, these findings have important implications for redefining learning orientation. PAI learning may benefit from being designed not only as a medium for transmitting values but also as a structured learning process that actively engages students in higher-order thinking through aligned objectives, activities, and assessments. Thus, HOTS is not a concept that contradicts religious learning but rather enriches the internalization of values through a more rational and contextual approach.

Practically, this research emphasizes shifting from fragmented to integrative learning design. Teachers need to design objectives, activities, and assessments simultaneously, considering the functional interrelationships between them. Furthermore, the development of HOTS-based assessments should be prioritized given their strategic role in guiding student learning. A gradual strategy is needed to build a culture of critical thinking in the classroom. Students cannot instantly adapt to HOTS-based learning, so a systematic scaffolding approach is required (Kuncoro & Turahmat, 2025). Teachers also need to create a safe and supportive learning environment so that students feel confident expressing opinions and developing arguments.

Strengthening HOTS in PAI learning cannot be achieved through partial interventions but rather through a comprehensive transformation of learning design, supported by improved teacher competency and a shift in learning culture. Without this, HOTS will remain a normative discourse that is not fully realized in educational practice.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning design at SMAN 17 Surabaya from the perspective of constructive alignment and its integration with Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). The findings reveal that the PAI learning design has structurally adopted the basic principle of constructive alignment, characterized by the formulation of learning objectives, activities, and assessments within the teaching modules. However, alignment between these components has not yet been fully realized in an integrated manner.

The most prominent misalignment identified in this study lies in the gap between learning objectives formulated at higher-order thinking levels and assessment practices that predominantly measure lower-order cognitive skills. The learning design remains

partial, with the relationships between objectives, activities, and evaluations not functionally designed to mutually support the achievement of learning outcomes. Consequently, the presence of these learning components does not automatically guarantee the effectiveness of the learning process.

From the perspective of strengthening HOTS, an imbalance was found between learning components. Learning objectives have focused on higher cognitive levels, such as analysis and evaluation, but have not been consistently accompanied by commensurate learning activities and assessments. Learning activities remain dominated by conventional approaches with limited student cognitive engagement, while assessments tend to focus on lower-order thinking skills. HOTS in PAI learning appears to remain at the conceptual level, meaning that teachers are able to formulate higher-order thinking objectives in lesson planning documents but have not consistently translated these objectives into corresponding learning activities and assessment tasks.

The implications of these findings emphasize that strengthening HOTS in PAI learning requires a truly aligned and systematic learning design. Constructive alignment cannot simply be understood as an administrative procedure; it must be internalized as a conceptual framework that guides the entire learning process. Therefore, efforts are needed to improve teacher competency in designing HOTS-based activities and assessments, as well as developing a learning culture that encourages active student engagement and critical thinking. This study highlights the need to improve teacher competency, particularly in designing assessment tasks that align with higher-order thinking objectives, as this was identified as the most critical area of misalignment.

This study has several limitations. The findings are based on document analysis and interviews with a limited number of participants (one teacher) without direct classroom observation. Therefore, the results should be interpreted within the scope of planned learning design rather than actual classroom implementation. The single-teacher sample, while allowing in-depth analysis, limits the generalizability of findings to other educational contexts.

Future research is recommended to include classroom observation in order to examine how planned learning design is implemented in actual teaching practice, particularly in identifying whether alignment between objectives, activities, and

assessments is maintained during classroom interaction. Comparative studies involving multiple teachers and schools would also strengthen the validity of findings. Additionally, future studies could explore the relationship between constructive alignment and student learning outcomes using mixed-method or quasi-experimental designs.

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