

Improving Arabic Reading Interest and Learning Outcomes Through Visual Media in Modern Islamic Boarding Schools

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ABSTRACT

The problem of low student interest and poor learning outcomes in Arabic reading comprehension (Muthola'ah) remains a significant challenge in language education, primarily due to monotonous teaching methods and the lack of engaging instructional media. This study aims to investigate the implementation of visual media to enhance student interest and learning outcomes in the Muthola'ah course. Utilizing a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, this study involved 21 male students from Class 1 Intensive D at Kuliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyah, PMDG Campus 9 Kalianda. Data were collected through direct observation, questionnaires, and tests across two iterative cycles comprising planning, action, observation, and reflection phases. The results indicate a substantial improvement in both metrics. In the pre-cycle, classical completeness was a mere 33.3%, which escalated to 61% in Cycle I, and peaked at 90% in Cycle II. Concurrently, student interest reached 89%, categorized as very good. These findings demonstrate that visual media effectively concretizes abstract concepts, thereby significantly elevating student motivation and learning achievement in Arabic reading.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension, known widely in Islamic educational frameworks as Muthola'ah, constitutes a foundational pillar in foreign language acquisition. It is not merely a mechanical process of decoding symbols, but a complex cognitive activity that equips students with extensive vocabulary, deep cultural context, and critical linguistic fluency (Nuraeni & Ammar, 2020; Suryadarma et al., 2024). Mastery of reading comprehension is essential for students to independently access, analyze, and interpret a vast array of literature and religious texts. In the global context of Arabic language education, developing strong reading skills is universally recognized as the primary gateway to achieving broader communicative competence and academic success.

However, a pervasive phenomenon frequently observed in foreign language classrooms is a general lack of student engagement when dealing with dense texts (Sulis, 2022). Teaching reading comprehension is often perceived by students as a tedious and highly demanding cognitive task. When educators rely exclusively on traditional, text-heavy translation methods without adequate pedagogical scaffolding, students quickly experience cognitive overload (Dixon & Oakhill, 2024). This widespread pedagogical challenge often leads to academic apathy, where students lose their intrinsic motivation to engage with the language, viewing reading as a chore rather than a meaningful communicative activity (Nurdianingsih, 2021).

Reading comprehension, known as *Muthola'ah* within the Islamic educational framework, is examined in this study within a specific institutional context. Within this general landscape, a specific and pressing instance of the problem was observed at Kulliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyah, Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Campus 9 Kalianda. Direct observations revealed that student interest in learning *Muthola'ah* at this institution is alarmingly low (Hamsar, 1441). During instructional hours, a significant number of these first-year intensive students failed to pay attention to the teacher's explanations. Instead of actively participating in the reading process, many students were observed engaging in disruptive play with their peers, exhibiting signs of severe boredom, or even succumbing to sleep during the lesson. This disengagement severely impedes the cognitive processing required for language acquisition.

The root cause of this disengagement lies in critical instructional deficits within the classroom: there is a severe lack of varied instructional media utilized by educators during *Muthola'ah* lessons (Hamsar, 1441). Teachers predominantly rely on conventional, monotonous delivery methods, utilizing only the limited, static, and often uninspiring images already printed in the standard textbooks. The students, who are already burdened by the fast-paced demands of an intensive curriculum, frequently express frustration over the dense volume of abstract reading materials. The combination of a heavy text volume and the absence of engaging visual media makes it exceedingly difficult for them to comprehend the narratives, directly resulting in the observed apathy and poor learning outcomes.

Recent pedagogical research consistently highlights the necessity of interactive and multimedia approaches to counter disengagement in language acquisition. According to cognitive theories of multimedia learning, integrating visual representations with verbal instruction significantly minimizes extraneous cognitive load. Mayer (2021) asserts that the human brain processes visual and verbal information through distinct, separate channels; therefore, presenting information through both channels simultaneously allows learners to build stronger, more resilient mental models of a second language (Mayer, 2021). This theoretical foundation suggests that visual media acts as a crucial pedagogical scaffold, translating abstract linguistic concepts into concrete, easily digestible information (Clark & Mayer, 2016). In the specific context of Arabic reading instruction, this theoretical mechanism implies that visual scaffolding can directly reduce the cognitive burden associated with unfamiliar vocabulary and complex sentence structures in *Muthola'ah* texts, thereby simultaneously supporting comprehension, sustaining student engagement, and improving measurable learning outcomes.

Furthermore, empirical studies within Islamic secondary education contexts have proven that moving away from monotonous, teacher-centered methods yields highly positive results. Research by Ririn and Zuhdi (2024) demonstrated that the application of collaborative learning strategies, such as Group Investigation, significantly elevates both intrinsic motivation and learning outcomes (Ririn & Zuhdi, 2024). Similarly, Rijal and Wayati (2022) found that utilizing interactive media like Index Card Match directly combats classroom boredom and fosters a highly active learning environment (Rijal & Wayati, 2022). These studies collectively establish that student engagement is heavily dependent on the dynamism of the instructional delivery.

In the specific realm of Arabic language teaching, current literature advocates strongly for contextualization and the departure from rote memorization. Sapawi and Yusoff (2025) emphasizes the need for an integrated curriculum that makes Arabic accessible and engaging through modern pedagogical tools (Sapawi & Yusoff, 2025). Historically, scholars like Alabi (2024) have also recognized that visual aids (*al-mu'inat al-bashariyyah*) act as a universal language that bridges the gap between the learner's native understanding and the target language, though the modern application of this principle requires systematic integration into classroom action frameworks (Alabi, 2024).

While existing literature extensively covers interactive teaching strategies and multimedia applications for general subjects or basic vocabulary acquisition, a thorough gap analysis reveals a distinct scarcity of research regarding the application of targeted visual media specifically for intensive, advanced Arabic reading comprehension (*Muthola'ah*). Most multimedia studies in Arabic learning focus on basic vocabulary retention (*mufradat*) or fundamental grammar (*qawaid*), leaving

complex narrative comprehension relatively unexplored (Dzunur'aini & Naimah, 2021; Hajar et al., 2024; Suryadarma et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the majority of these studies are situated within standard public or modern private schools. There is minimal literature exploring how targeted visual media interventions function within the unique, highly immersive, and traditional environment of an intensive Islamic boarding school (pesantren) track, such as the KMI system (Syarifah, 2016; Zaid et al., 2025). The specific cognitive demands placed on first-year intensive students, who must master complex texts rapidly, require a tailored visual scaffolding approach that has not been adequately addressed in prior Classroom Action Research.

Previous studies have primarily examined visual media for vocabulary acquisition, grammar instruction, and general language motivation, largely within standard public or private-school settings (Dzunur'aini & Naimah, 2021; Hajar et al., 2024; Suryadarma et al., 2023). Few studies, however, have investigated the effectiveness of visual media in facilitating higher-order reading comprehension processes, particularly within intensive Arabic learning environments where students encounter substantial textual complexity within a compressed timeframe, such as the KMI system. Because the cognitive demands, learner profile, and instructional context of intensive pesantren-based Muthola'ah instruction differ substantially from those of general vocabulary or grammar classrooms, findings from prior studies cannot be directly generalized to this setting, underscoring the need for context-specific investigation.

This research bridges the identified gap by introducing a targeted visual media intervention designed specifically for the heavy cognitive demands of the Muthola'ah curriculum in an intensive first-year setting. The novelty of this study lies not in the use of visual media itself, since visual aids have long been employed in language education, but in its contextual implementation as a cognitive scaffolding tool for intensive Muthola'ah instruction within the KMI pesantren system, a setting that combines a compressed intensive curriculum, first-year learners, and a Classroom Action Research design, and that has received limited scholarly attention to date. Based on these identified problems, the research purposes of this study are twofold: First, to reveal whether the implementation of visual media can improve the learning outcomes of Class 1 Intensive D students in the Muthola'ah course. Second, to reveal whether the implementation of visual media can enhance the learning interest of Class 1 Intensive D students in the Muthola'ah course.

METHODS

This study utilized a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design to empirically investigate and resolve the identified pedagogical challenges. CAR is a practical, localized methodology conducted directly within the classroom by educators to identify specific learning issues and implement iterative solutions. Following the established framework by Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014), the research was structured into two continuous cycles. Each cycle consisted of four distinct and interdependent phases: planning, implementation (action), observation, and reflection (Kemmis et al., 2014). The cyclical nature of this design allowed for continuous pedagogical refinement based on real-time classroom data.

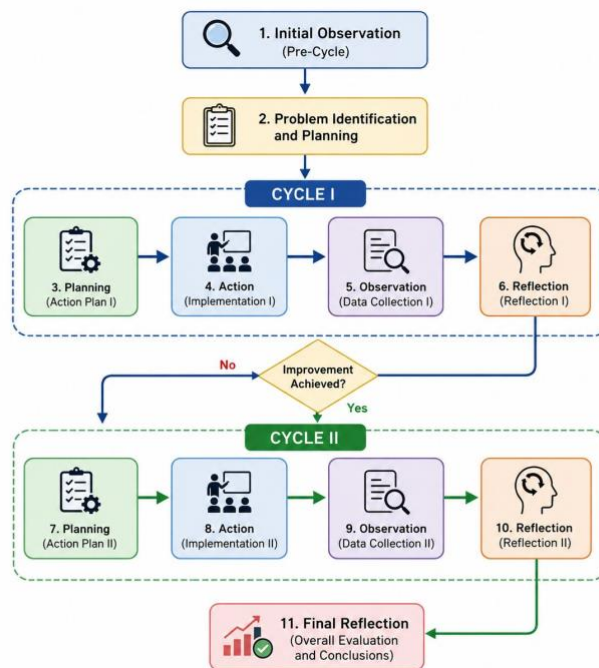


Figure 1. Classroom Action Research (CAR) Cycle Flowchart (*Source: Primary Data owned by Authors*)

The data source for this study comprised 21 male students enrolled in Class 1 Intensive D at Kulliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyah, Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Campus 9 Kalianda. The research was systematically executed during the second semester of the 1440-1441 H academic year. The study gathered both quantitative and qualitative data types to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the intervention. Quantitative data consisted of student test scores to measure cognitive learning outcomes and percentage metrics derived from student questionnaires assessing learning interest. Qualitative data comprised detailed field notes from direct classroom observations detailing student behavior and teacher performance during the instructional process.

Data collection techniques involved three primary instruments. First, structured observation sheets were utilized to systematically record the activities and engagement levels of both the teacher (researcher) and the students during the implementation of the visual media. Second, a written questionnaire consisting of 10 items distributed across 6 key indicators (will, attention, happiness, motivation, duty, and knowledge) was administered to quantify student interest on a definitive scale. Third, cognitive tests were administered at three distinct points: an initial pre-test to establish a baseline, a post-test concluding Cycle I, and a final post-test concluding Cycle II, to empirically measure comprehension of the Muthola'ah texts, specifically focusing on narratives such as *Al-Anzani* (The Two Goats) and *Al-Hariqu* (The Fire)

Data analysis techniques were conducted operationally by examining the outcomes of each cycle against predetermined success criteria. Student test scores were analyzed by calculating the class mean and the percentage of classical completeness. A student was deemed successful if they achieved a minimum score of 6.0, aligning with institutional standards. The formula utilized for classical completeness was the total number of students passing divided by the total number of students, multiplied by 100%. Questionnaire responses were analyzed by calculating the frequency of positive responses across the indicators, resulting in a percentage that was categorized on a descriptive scale ranging from 'Very Poor' (0-20%) to 'Very Good' (81-100%).

FINDINGS

The implementation of visual media across the research cycles yielded significant, quantifiable improvements in both academic performance and student interest. Initial observations and the pre-cycle test revealed a severe deficiency in reading comprehension. Prior to the intervention, only 7 students out of 21 managed to achieve the passing grade of 6.0. This resulted in a classical completeness rate of just 33.3%, with the class average stagnating at a low 5.2. These baseline metrics confirmed the urgent need for pedagogical intervention.

Following the introduction of visual media in Cycle I, an immediate positive shift was recorded in the classroom dynamics and academic results. During the lessons, the teacher displayed contextual images to illustrate the narrative, prompting students to connect visual cues with Arabic vocabulary. Consequently, the number of students passing the assessment increased to 13, raising the classical completeness rate to 61% and the class average to 6.2. While this demonstrated tangible progress, the target for classical completeness had not yet been fully realized, necessitating further refinement in Cycle II.

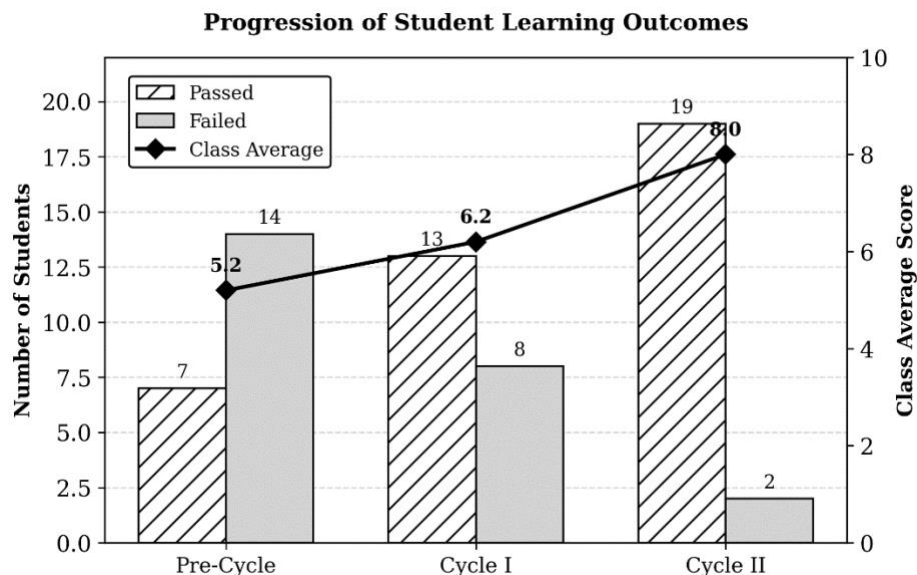
Based on critical reflections from Cycle I, which noted that some students still exhibited passive behavior and reliance on peers during group questioning, instructional delivery was refined for Cycle II to ensure maximum visual engagement and individual accountability. The teacher increased interactive questioning directly related to the displayed images. Consequently, Cycle II demonstrated optimal outcomes. Nineteen (19) out of 21 students successfully passed the test, driving the classical completeness to an impressive 90% and elevating the class average to 8.0. To provide an interpretable visual representation of this result regarding both student achievement in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 is detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Comparison of Student Learning Outcomes across Cycles

No	Indicator	Pre-Cycle	Cycle I	Cycle II
1	Passed Students	7	13	19
2	Percentage	33.3%	61%	90%
3	Failed Students	14	8	2
4	Percentage	66.7%	39%	10%

Source: Primary Data owned by Authors

The post-intervention questionnaire data provide an additional, complementary indicator of student engagement. Analysis of the 10-item questionnaire, administered upon completion of Cycle II, indicated that 66% of students strongly agreed that they arrived to class on time, 76% strongly agreed that they proactively re-read the material, 61% strongly agreed that they paid close attention to the teacher's visual explanations, and 62% reported high enthusiasm for learning. Cumulatively, the total score for student interest reached 89%, placing student engagement in the 'Very Good' category. It should be noted that this questionnaire was administered only once, at the end of Cycle II; comparative interest data for the pre-cycle and Cycle I were therefore not collected, and this measurement design should be strengthened in future replications by administering the



questionnaire at the end of every cycle. The overall pattern of results, encompassing both the cognitive test scores and the questionnaire data, is summarized visually in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Progression of Student Learning Outcomes and Class Average
Source: Primary Data owned by Authors

DISCUSSION

The empirical data gathered throughout the Classroom Action Research indicate a consistent association between the use of visual media and improved outcomes in Arabic reading comprehension (Muthola'ah). Classical completeness rose from a critically low 33.3% in the pre-cycle to 61% in Cycle I, and reached 90% by Cycle II. While this upward trajectory is consistent with the intended function of the intervention, it should be interpreted with appropriate caution: as a Classroom Action Research design without a control or comparison class, this study cannot isolate the visual-media intervention from other concurrent factors, such as increased teacher attention, the novelty effect of a new teaching method, or a natural learning curve across repeated testing that may also have contributed to the observed improvement.

This significant cognitive improvement can be analyzed fundamentally through the lens of cognitive scaffolding and multimedia learning. Prior to the study, students struggled with a high volume of abstract Arabic texts, which led to cognitive overload. By displaying relevant contextual images—such as specific illustrations differentiating the cooperative goats on a narrow path from the aggressive goats on a bridge in the text *Al-Anzan*—the teacher successfully bridged the gap between unknown Arabic vocabulary and known visual concepts. This aligns directly with Mayer's (2020) Multimedia Learning Theory, which posits that integrating visual and verbal information reduces extraneous mental strain and deepens overall comprehension (Mayer, 2021). Visual media transforms abstract narratives into concrete realities, making the cognitive processing of a foreign language significantly more efficient (Clark & Mayer, 2016).

Beyond cognitive gains, the visual media intervention profoundly impacted the students' affective domain, as evidenced by the questionnaire results. The data revealed that 89% of the students demonstrated a "Very Good" level of learning interest following the intervention. Indicators such as enthusiasm, attention to the teacher, and eagerness to re-read the materials scored highly. This affective shift is consistent with foundational educational psychology theories, which state that interest is a powerful psychological mechanism that drives sustained attention and intrinsic motivation (Bailey et al., 2021). When the learning process transitions from monotonous rote translation to an engaging visual experience, students no longer view the subject as a burden, thereby naturally eliminating classroom issues such as drowsiness and disruptive behavior (Indrayanti et al., 2023).

The findings of this study strongly corroborate previous research regarding the necessity of interactive pedagogy in Islamic educational settings. The transition from passive listeners to active participants mirrors the successful outcomes documented by Ririn and Zuhdi (2024) and Rijal and Wayati (2022). While those studies utilized strategies like Index Card Match and Group Investigation to break classroom monotony, this current research suggests that targeted visual media can serve a comparable catalytic function for reading comprehension (Rijal & Wayati, 2022; Ririn & Zuhdi, 2024). Unlike Index Card Match or Group Investigation, which operate primarily through social and collaborative engagement, visual media appears to function chiefly through cognitive-representational scaffolding; this suggests the two families of strategies may be complementary rather than interchangeable, each addressing a different mechanism of disengagement. Taken together, the findings are consistent with the broader premise that moving away from traditional, teacher-centered, textbook-only methods toward more stimulating learning environments supports intrinsic motivation, though this study can speak most directly to the cognitive-scaffolding pathway rather than the social-collaborative one.

Specifically within the context of Arabic language teaching, the visual media acted as a universal linguistic bridge. As posited by classical language educators, a picture truly functions as a shared language that can be immediately understood without the need for constant native-language translation (Sapawi & Yusoff, 2025). By relying on images rather than direct Indonesian translations to explain Arabic concepts, the teacher maintained the immersive Arabic environment while ensuring total comprehension. This method prevents the habit of mental translation and encourages students to think directly in the target language, a crucial step for achieving true reading fluency.

Finally, the success of this intervention holds significant implications for the broader pesantren educational system. It demonstrates that traditional, text-heavy curricula, such as the KMI *Muthola'ah* program, can be vastly improved without losing their classical essence. By integrating modern, evidence-based pedagogical tools like visual media, traditional institutions can modernize their instructional delivery to meet the psychological and cognitive needs of today's learners (Dixon & Oakhill, 2024). The Classroom Action Research methodology applied here proves that continuous, localized pedagogical reflection and adaptation can successfully bridge the gap between classical Islamic educational ideals and contemporary educational method.

The specific contribution of this study, therefore, lies in demonstrating that visual scaffolding can be systematically embedded within the iterative cycles of Classroom Action Research to target reading comprehension—rather than vocabulary or grammar, which dominate prior literature—within an intensive, first-year KMI pesantren setting, a combination not previously documented in the studies reviewed above.

Several limitations warrant critical reflection. First, as noted above, the absence of a control or comparison class means the observed gains cannot be attributed to visual media alone. Second, the sample was restricted to 21 male students in a single intensive class, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other classes, genders, or proficiency levels within the KMI system. Third, the learning-interest questionnaire was administered only once, at the end of the intervention, which restricts the ability to trace the trajectory of affective change across cycles in the same way the cognitive test scores were tracked. Finally, as is characteristic of Classroom Action Research, the primary aim of this study was localized pedagogical improvement rather than the generation of generalizable causal

claims; the findings should therefore be read as evidence of contextual effectiveness within this specific classroom rather than as proof of a universal instructional principle.

CONCLUSIONS

This research conclusively demonstrates that the implementation of visual media is highly effective in teaching Arabic reading comprehension (*Muthola'ah*). The strategic integration of imagery successfully elevated student learning outcomes, advancing from a critically low 33.3% classical completeness rate in the pre-cycle to a highly satisfactory 90% by the conclusion of Cycle II. Concurrently, student interest experienced a massive boost, achieving an 89% rating, categorized as very good. These results confirm that visual media effectively concretizes abstract concepts, reducing cognitive load and maximizing engagement.

The primary contribution of this study lies in providing a practical, evidence-based framework for modernizing pedagogical tools within traditional Islamic boarding school settings, proving that classical language acquisition is vastly improved through visual-cognitive scaffolding. However, this study acknowledges limitations, notably its small sample size of 21 students and its specific focus on a single intensive first-year cohort within a restricted timeframe. Based on these findings, it is strongly suggested that language educators and institutional policymakers actively integrate visual and multimedia tools into standard curricula to foster an engaging educational ecosystem. Future research should expand upon this foundation by exploring broader digital multimedia technologies across varying subjects and larger demographics to continually advance the praxis of educational technology in Arabic language learning.

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