

The Dynamics of Reading Kitab Kuning at Ibtida' Level in Pesantren

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Abstract

Learning Kitab Kuning is a characteristic of traditional Islamic boarding school education which has an important role in preserving the classical Islamic knowledge. However, in its implementation, especially at the Ibtida' level, various obstacles are often found that hinder learning activities. This study aims to identify the problems faced in the yellow book reading method in Islamic Boarding Schools, especially at the Ibtida' level, and to analyze the causal factors and their impact on the learning achievements of students. The research method used is a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results of the study indicate that The results of the study show that there are 4 (four) dynamics of the Kitab Kuning reading method, including (1) low basic Arabic language competency of students and a linguistic system that contrasts with Indonesian; (2) low motivation to learn of students, (3) limited quantity of teacher, and (4) there is no standardization of standard Kitab Kuning learning methods, especially at the Ibtida' level. This study recommends the need for innovation in teaching methods that are more communicative and interactive from teacher, as well as full support from the Islamic boarding school institution to be able to answer the dynamics of the Kitab Kuning reading method.

Keywords: Learning Kitab Kuning; Ibtida' Level; Pesantren; Learning Method

1. Introduction

Pesantren are unique Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia that play an important role in preserving and transmitting classical Islamic knowledge (Abuddar et al., 2024; Asniah et al., 2019; Sadali, 2020). One of the distinctive features of pesantren education is the teaching of classical Arabic texts without vowel marks (*Kitab Gundul*), which serve as the primary sources in the Islamic studies curriculum, such as the content from classical texts (*kutub al-turats*) in *Fiqh*, *Tafsir*, and *Nahwu* (Muliana et al., 2024; F. Ulya & Nikmah, 2024). To understand and master the *Kitab Kuning*, students are equipped with a book reading method, which is theoretically designed to

systematically train their grammatical, interpretative, and contextualisation skills in understanding the content of the books.

Various methods have been developed to help students understand classical Islamic texts more easily, especially at the beginner level. Some examples of these methods include the *sorogan* method (individual learning between students and teachers), *bandongan* (classical study sessions with explanations from religious leaders), *halaqah* (group discussions based on religious texts), *muhafadzah* (memorization), and *bahtsul masail* (scientific forums for discussing contemporary issues using the classical religious texts as a framework). These methods not only serve as a means of knowledge transfer but also as a medium for character building, discipline, and critical thinking skills among students (Kusumawati & Nurfuadi, 2024).

These teaching methods are believed to be effective when applied with discipline and in accordance with the developmental stage of the students' abilities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This is evident in the many students who are able to understand the theoretical principles of Arabic grammar (*Nahwu* and *Shorof*). However, there is a disparity between the ideal understanding outlined in theory and the reality of implementation in various Islamic boarding schools. For example, their inability to apply *Nahwu-Shorof* theory to texts and their high dependence on translations.

Several indicators of the causes are shown in the weak basic understanding of Arabic among students, the dominance of one-way teaching methods that are not very communicative, and the limited adaptation of methods to the individual needs of beginner students. Many Islamic boarding schools still rely on traditional methods without adapting them to modern pedagogical approaches that are more interactive and competency-based (Djazilan, 2019; Marwiji et al., 2024). As a result, the process of learning the *Kitab Kuning* at the *Ibtida'* level often runs less effectively and causes boredom among students.

Therefore, it is important to conduct further research on the problems that arise in the method of reading classical Islamic texts in Islamic boarding schools at the *Ibtida'* level. This study aims not only to identify the obstacles that occur in learning practices but also to explore the possibility of reconstructing a method of reading classical Islamic texts that is more contextual, innovative, and in line with the needs of novice students in the current era.

2. Methode

Berisi jenis penelitian, waktu dan tempat penelitian, target/sasaran, subjek penelitian, prosedur, instrumen dan teknik analisis data serta hal-hal lain yang berkaitan dengan cara penelitiannya yang dapat ditulis dalam sub-subbab, dengan sub-subheading.

This study is a descriptive qualitative study that aims to analyse issues related to the method of teaching the *Kitab Kuning* at the Ihyaul Ulum *Pesantren* in Lamongan. The primary data used in this study includes direct information about the process of teaching the *Kitab Kuning* in the boarding school environment. Meanwhile, secondary data includes various other relevant supporting sources (Creswell, 2016). The data sources were obtained from various parties involved in *Pesantren* activities, such as kiai, ustaz, santri, and others.

The data collection technique used in this study was interviews, in line with the approach commonly used in qualitative research (Anjarwati et al., 2024). The interview technique was used to explore in-depth information about the process of learning the *Kitab Kuning* in the *Pesantren* environment. This technique was combined with observation and documentation methods to obtain more comprehensive and accurate data. The researcher played a direct role as the main instrument in the data collection and interpretation process (Aprilyada & Zidan, 2023). Data analysis was carried out directly by the researcher, from the research implementation stage to the preparation of reports or scientific articles.

3. Result and Discussion

Ihyaul Ulum *Pesantren* is an Islamic educational institution that instils Islamic values through in-depth study of the *Kitab Kuning*, a legacy of the archipelago's scholars. The *Kitab Kuning*, often referred to as turats, is not just an ancient book written in Arabic script, but also a repository of knowledge containing profound wisdom in *Fiqh*, *Tauhid*, *Tasawuf*, and *Tafsir*. These books serve as a window connecting *Ibtida'* level students with the thoughts of earlier scholars.

The study of the *Kitab Kuning* at the *Ibtida'* level focuses on the fundamentals of religious knowledge to ensure students have a strong foundation before progressing to the next level. The books studied by *Ibtida'* level students are foundational texts, such as the *Kitab Matan Jurumiyah* (grammar), *Kitab Amsilatut Tasrifayah* (morphology), *Kitab Mabadi'* volumes

one and two (*Fiqh*), *Kitab Aqidatul Awam (Tauhid)*, and *Kitab Taesirul Kholak (Akhlak)*. KH. Nurul Utsman revealed:

“Santri Ibtida’ is the introductory phase. In this introductory phase, it is important for the children to feel comfortable first. If at the beginning of this phase the students are pressured with difficult texts, it will make them uncomfortable”.

The study of classical Islamic texts at the elementary level is the core of the learning process, implemented through the *Madrasi* and *Halaqoh* systems. The *Madrasi* system is carried out by incorporating *Kitab Kuning* lessons into the formal school curriculum. This learning activity is conducted using modern methods, where elementary-level students are grouped according to their class levels, and teachers follow the scheduled timetable. Meanwhile, the *Halaqoh* system uses the *Sorogan* and *Bandongan* methods, where teachers directly guide students in understanding the essence of each written letter. This process is not merely about transferring knowledge but also about instilling values and etiquette at the *ibtida’* level.

The study of the *Kitab Kuning* at the *Ibtida’* level becomes the main spirit in the learning process by implementing the *Madrasi* and *Halaqoh* systems. The *Madrasi* system is carried out by incorporating the *Kitab Kuning* lessons into the schedule of formal school teaching and learning activities. This learning activity is conducted using a modern method, where *Ibtida’* level students are grouped according to their class, and teachers follow the distributed schedule. Meanwhile, the *Halaqoh* system uses the *Sorogan* and *Bandongan* methods, where the teacher directly guides the students in understanding the essence of each written letter. This process is not merely a transfer of knowledge, but also a transfer of values and etiquette at the *Ibtida’* level. The *Muhafadzoh* or memorization method is used by beginner students to present their memorization to the class teacher outside of lesson hours.

Some of the problems with the *Kitab Kuning* reading method at the *Ibtida’* level Islamic boarding school include, first, the low basic Arabic language competence and the linguistic system that contrasts with Indonesian. This problem arises from the students, where they are hindered in understanding the text due to the interaction of these two aspects, complicating the process of text comprehension (Annisa & Safii, 2023).

One example is the limited mastery of *Nahwu* and *Shorof* rules. Research data shows that most students have difficulty understanding the grammatical structure of the Arabic language. They do not yet have an adequate

understanding of *Nahwu* and *Shorof*. In fact, these two sciences are the main foundation for reading and understanding unvowelized *Kitab Kuning*.

This is reinforced by the finding that some students are not yet familiar with the concepts of '*amil* and '*ma'mul*, as well as the forms of *tashrif fi'il*. However, understanding these aspects is essential to be able to translate and comprehend the contents of the book. This obstacle hinders the comprehensive understanding of the text and causes complete dependence on the teacher in the learning process. Ma'arif mentioned that the weakness in mastering *Nahwu-Shorof* rules is the main challenge for beginner students in learning the *Kitab Kuning* at the *Pesantren* (Amir, 2020).

The solution that can be used to address this issue is to develop a hybrid learning method, a learning approach that combines traditional and modern methods. This can be done with an integrative approach, where traditional methods remain the main foundation in learning, but are supported by modern methods to accelerate understanding and provide broader access for students (Mudzakkir et al., 2024).

Table 1. *Kitab Kuning* Reading Method

No	Traditional Method	Modern Methode
1	<i>Sorogan</i>	<i>Al Miftah Lil Ulum</i>
2	<i>Bandongan</i>	<i>Amsilati</i>
3	<i>Muhafadloh</i>	<i>Ibtida'I</i>
4	<i>Tallaqi</i>	<i>Tamyiz</i>

The table above presents the teaching methods used at Ihyaul Ulum *Pesantren*. The traditional method has the advantage of providing depth of knowledge and closeness with the teacher. The close relationship between the teacher and the students also creates an educational atmosphere full of blessings, where the students not only learn knowledge but also receive blessings from their teacher (Sari & Fikriyah, 2022). However, this method is often considered less interactive, as students play more of a listening role rather than being active subjects in discussing or critiquing the texts being studied. Additionally, this method tends to take more time because the explanations are given in detail and repeatedly (Aris & Syukron, 2020).

Modern methods provide flexibility and independence in learning (Divina et al., 2023; Kenjabaev, 2024; Müller et al., 2023). This method provides students with the freedom to study texts systematically and based on

research. The advantages of this method include enhancing the independence of students in learning. The practical and interactive approach makes it easier for students to understand difficult Arabic language concepts. Additionally, the focus on speaking and listening skills helps improve their communication abilities. Like the *Amtsilati* method, which is applicative in nature, where students are actively involved in real situations, allowing them to apply Arabic in everyday contexts (Fitriyah, 2023). On the other hand, modern methods have weaknesses, such as the lack of direct interaction with teachers, which can reduce the aspect of *talaqqi* (learning directly from a teacher with a chain of knowledge) and the lack of focus on mastering formal grammar.

Based on the above analysis, a comprehensive evaluation of the characteristics and needs of students is necessary to determine the suitability of this method in a specific learning context (Fitriyah, 2023). By combining traditional and modern methods, Islamic boarding schools are able to create an effective kitab reading learning system that remains rooted in the tradition of Islamic scholarship (Anam, 2017).

The second problem is the low motivation of the students. Learning motivation is one of the keys to the success of the learning process. The motivation of students in studying the yellow book is also a determining factor in the success of the reading method at Ihyaul Ulum *Pesantren*. Research data indicates that not all students have high motivation in studying the yellow book. In fact, they feel compelled to study the yellow book. This is due to the demands and pressure from their parents, rather than their own desire. The effect that arises is that the students find it difficult to understand the material, leading them to be reluctant to attend the religious studies. Low understanding from the beginning can create learning frustration, which then impacts the minimal active participation during the learning process. As a result, there is low learning motivation and dissatisfaction with the learning process (Banowati et al., 2023).

Several factors that influence this low motivation include: an unsupportive formal education background, boring teaching methods, and a lack of an approach that humanizes students as individuals with different learning needs. The diverse educational backgrounds of the students—ranging from elementary school graduates, junior high school graduates, to those who have never studied Arabic at all—result in a significant gap in abilities. This makes it difficult for teachers to deliver the material with a uniform approach (Aini et al., 2022). Qowi explained that the lack of innovation in the Kitab Kuning learning can directly impact the decline in

students' interest in studying (Al-Qowi et al., 2024). In addition, the limited facilities and infrastructure, as well as the less conducive learning environment. The cramped study space, lack of supporting books, and insufficient individual guidance make the learning process less than optimal.

Solutions that can be implemented to address the issue of student motivation include providing a conducive learning environment (Dalimunthe et al., 2024; Johnson, 2017; Saputri et al., 2023), such as utilising open spaces, peer mentoring systems, and regular formative evaluations. This requires educators to be creative in creating a pleasant and engaging learning atmosphere, using methods such as group discussions, educational games, and visual media, thereby increasing students' interest and motivation (Suharni, 2021).

There is a need to improve the quality of teachers' competencies, such as the use of learning technology in the digital era, expanding collaborative relationships between institutions or with universities to conduct training for teachers. The introduction of technology in learning also greatly assists teachers in delivering material more effectively (Fadilah & Kanya, 2023). Additionally, teachers can apply the concept of introducing practical values from the 'kitab kuning' into daily life. This can motivate students to take their studies more seriously. By demonstrating the relevance of the material being studied to real life, it is hoped that students will become more enthusiastic and motivated to delve deeper into the knowledge being taught (Paramansyah et al., 2022).

Third is the limitation of teaching staff. This problem stems from the resources of the Islamic boarding school. Research data indicates that the number of teachers in Islamic boarding schools is very limited, with one teacher often having to handle more than 25 students in one class. KH. Nurul Utsman explains.

"It is very difficult to find teachers who are willing to work for free or for minimal pay these days. All of the teachers at this boarding school are highly motivated".

The above statement is exacerbated by data showing that some teachers do not have adequate academic qualifications in Arabic and Islamic studies. In addition, training and professional development for teachers is still not optimal. Some of them have not had the opportunity to participate in training or discussions related to effective teaching methods. This causes them to be stuck in conventional teaching methods that are less appealing to students.

Such as traditional teaching methods that are still dominated by one-way lectures, without the use of supporting media or participatory approaches. Or the *Bandongan* and *Sorogan* methods, which often result in students being passive because they only listen to the teacher's explanations without sufficient interaction. Meanwhile, the *Sorogan* method, which requires students to read and explain the contents of the *Kitab* directly, also causes psychological pressure for beginner students. Although these methods have historical and cultural value, they are deemed insufficient to address the learning needs of *Ibtida'* students in the current era. One student said,

"Studying the *Kitab Kuning* is very difficult, especially when studying *Nahwu* and *Shorof*. *Nahwu* and *Shorof* are easy to memorise when learning the rules, but when asked to explain their meaning and significance, it is very difficult".

One solution that teachers can implement is to innovate in their methods of teaching the recitation of the Qur'an, for example by applying contextual methods, simple digital media, or small group discussion models so that students can be more actively involved and find it easier to understand the texts being taught and improve their analytical skills in relation to the books being studied (H. Ulya et al., 2020). Alternatively, teachers of classical texts can be trained in communicative pedagogical strategies and differentiated instruction methods that can be adapted to the students' ability levels (Mukminin et al., 2023). Additionally, *Pesantren* can strengthen their basic Arabic language programmes before moving on to classical text reading, such as through intensive, practical training in *Nahwu-Sharaf*.

Fourth, there is no standardised method for teaching *Kitab Kuning* texts, especially at the *Ibtida'* level. Standardisation aims to unify the perceptions and approaches of teachers in educating students so that they gain systematic and structured understanding from the outset. However, in reality, the standards for teaching *Kitab Kuning* texts at Ihyaul Ulum are not uniform, so each teacher tends to apply methods based on their own experience and educational background. Ust. Hasanuddin explained:

"The lack of professional staff specialising in developing methods for *Ibtida'* students is the main reason for the inconsistency in the teaching system at this boarding school (Ihyaul Ulum)."

The diverse methods and differing perceptions in teaching the *Kitab Kuning* at Ihyaul Ulum are influenced by the educational backgrounds of the teachers. One example is teachers with a background from the *Langitan Pesantren* using the *Langitan*-specific method, which emphasises memorisation, *Sorogan*, and *Bandongan* with Javanese interpretations in

understanding the texts of classical Islamic texts. Teachers from other boarding schools use methods consistent with their respective boarding school traditions, such as Indonesian language translation methods or approaches characteristic of the *Pesantren* they previously attended.

These differences in background lead to inconsistencies in teaching methods, creating a situation where each teacher seems to be working independently in applying their methods. In some cases, there is even the impression of competition among teachers to highlight the methods they consider most effective. This situation has a significant impact on the development of *Ibtida'* level students, such as students losing focus in the early stages of understanding the classical texts. If the methods used vary between teachers, they may find it difficult to adapt (Nantana et al., 2024).

Students who should be more mature in their basic understanding instead experience confusion due to inconsistent approaches. Another consequence is difficulty in developing a systematic learning pattern that can provide a coherent learning structure. If each teacher uses different methods, students will experience inconsistency in the learning process. As a result, their understanding of the classical texts does not develop gradually and structurally but follows different methods without continuity.

A solution to address this issue is the establishment of standardised teaching methods for the *Kitab Kuning* at the *Ibtida'* level in the *Ihyaul Ulum Pesantren*. Combining classical and modern methods will yield a specialised teaching method for instructors (Alessa & Hussein, 2023; Conțu, 2017; Sadeghi, 2007). There is a need for evaluation and revision, taking into account the aspects of the students as agreed upon by the teachers of the boarding school, until the point of perfection, namely the establishment of an integrated teaching method as a guideline and standard for teachers at the boarding school. Additionally, there is a need for training and coordination among teachers to align perceptions in the teaching of the *Kitab Kuning*. Good communication will minimise the perception of competition and enhance cooperation in educating students (Petro, 2023; Tran et al., 2019; Zamroni et al., 2022).

4. Conclusion

There are four dynamics in the method of reading *Kitab Kuning* at the *Ibtida'* level of *Pesantren*, namely (1) the low level of basic Arabic language competence among students and the contrasting linguistic systems between Arabic and Indonesian, one example being the limited mastery of *Nahwu*

Shorof rules; (2) low student motivation to learn due to internal and external factors; (3) the limited number of teachers, with some teachers not yet having maximum competence in Arabic language and Islamic studies, and (4) the absence of standardised methods for teaching classical Islamic texts, particularly at the *Ibtida'* level.

Some proposed solutions include: (1) developing hybrid teaching methods by integrating classical and modern teaching methods; (2) creating a conducive learning environment through innovative digital teaching methods and applying the practical values of the *Kitab Kuning* in daily life; (3) implementing a basic Arabic language programme through intensive, applied *Nahwu-Sharaf* training. and; (4) standardising teaching methods in Islamic boarding schools.

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