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Exploring Pedagogical Innovations to Address Low Student Interest in Islamic Religious Education at Islamic Senior High School

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ABSTRACT

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is pivotal in shaping students' moral character, yet educators struggle to sustain engagement among digital-native adolescents. This qualitative case study explored pedagogical innovations implemented by IRE teachers to address low learning interest among eleventh-grade students at SMA Islam El Syihab, Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, examining student responses, pedagogical challenges, and coping strategies. Data were gathered through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and students, and documentation, and then analyzed using an interactive model (data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing) with source and method triangulation ensuring credibility. The findings reveal that teachers integrated active-learning methods (group discussions, case studies, collaborative projects), digital tools (PowerPoint, Canva, YouTube, Kahoot!), and reward-based quizzes, explicitly linking content to contemporary adolescent experiences. These innovations enhanced student attention, participation, and enthusiasm, though outcomes varied due to differing comprehension speeds, fluctuating concentration, and limited instructional time. Teachers mitigated these challenges through adaptive grouping, diverse visual media, and interactive activities. This study concludes that continuous, contextual, and learner-sensitive pedagogical innovation effectively fosters student interest, offering a holistic account of innovation beyond rigid, single-model frameworks. Future research should quantitatively examine the comparative effectiveness of specific innovation models on learning outcomes at a broader scale.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, hereafter PAI) occupies a central position in the formation of students' character, addressing spiritual, moral, social, and emotional development simultaneously (Gani et al., 2024; Rochim & Tolchah, 2024). Beyond transmitting religious knowledge, PAI functions as a vehicle for internalizing Islamic values into students' daily conduct. Effective PAI instruction

is expected to help students understand Islamic teachings contextually, cultivate a religious disposition, and build sound character amid the pressures of contemporary life (Muhammad et al., 2025). Reaching that outcome depends heavily on teachers' capacity to design learning experiences that are meaningful, engaging, and responsive to the needs of today's learners.

In practice, however, PAI instruction is still frequently constrained by low student interest. This shows up as limited attention during lessons, weak participation in discussion, reluctance to ask questions, and a tendency among students to treat PAI as a normative, text-bound subject rather than a lived practice (Ijudin et al., 2022; Naumi et al., 2025; Sholeh et al., 2024). Teacher-centered instruction that relies heavily on lecturing, with little room for active learning experience, risks leaving students bored (Mpho, 2018). Learning interest, in this regard, is a key psychological factor shaping the quality of student engagement: Hefter and Nitsch (2024) describe it as a sense of liking, attraction, and attention toward a learning activity that arises without external compulsion.

The problem of low interest in PAI becomes more complex at the senior secondary level (Mujakir et al., 2026). Students at this stage are in an adolescent phase marked by sharper critical thinking, greater selectivity, and close familiarity with digital culture; they need instruction that goes beyond memorization or conceptual explanation to include interaction, visualization, practice, and connection to real life (Zamzami et al., 2025). Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum further expects teachers to deliver instruction that is flexible, contextual, and learner-centered (Kumayas et al., 2025). When PAI instruction remains monotonous and low in participation, the broader aim of religious education — shaping values and character — becomes correspondingly difficult to achieve (Oktayani et al., 2025).

One response to this problem is pedagogical innovation, understood as a renewal of methods, strategies, media, or approaches intended to increase the effectiveness and appeal of learning. In PAI specifically, innovation is not limited to digital technology; it also covers discussion-based methods, case studies, creative projects, devotional practice, educational games, and the deliberate linking of religious content to issues close to students' lives (Solichin et al., 2023; Susanti et al., 2024). This view aligns with the PAIKEM concept—active, innovative, creative, effective, and enjoyable learning—which foregrounds direct student involvement in constructing understanding (Hidayat, 2012; Yunita et al., 2025).

A body of prior research points to the positive contribution of learning innovation to interest, motivation, and the overall quality of PAI instruction. Safroni and Hidayah (2024), for instance, found that gamified instruction raised student enthusiasm and engagement through play, reward, and friendly competition. Adilah et al. (2024) reported that innovative methods, interactive media, simulation, and teacher–student collaboration improved the quality of PAI instruction at the senior secondary level, while Abdullah et al. (2023) showed that contextually grounded innovation encouraged students to engage more actively and apply Islamic values in practice. Much of this work, however, centers on a single model or method; comparatively little research has

examined the broader range of innovation forms that PAI teachers combine in practice and how these forms relate, together, to student interest.

Fieldwork at SMA Islam El Syihab, Bandar Lampung, points in a similar direction while also surfacing this gap concretely. The PAI teacher has already moved toward more varied instruction through group discussion, visual media, and interactive activities, and many students respond with active discussion, attentive listening, and timely responses to instructions. At the same time, some students remain visibly disengaged chatting off-topic, slouching at their desks, fidgeting with pens, or showing signs of drowsiness. Preliminary interviews indicate that students respond more positively to visual media, hands-on practice, quizzes, and other participatory formats, while extended lecturing or passive presentation tends to lower their attention and involvement.

These observations suggest that learning innovation in PAI at SMA Islam El Syihab has begun but still needs strengthening to reach students more evenly. This study was therefore designed to examine, in an integrated way rather than through a single model, the forms of pedagogical innovation that PAI teachers implement, how students respond to them in terms of learning interest, and the challenges teachers face together with the strategies they use to address low interest. Specifically, the study addresses three questions: (1) What forms of pedagogical innovation do PAI teachers implement to address eleventh-grade students' low learning interest? (2) How do students respond, in terms of learning interest, to the implementation of these innovations? (3) What challenges do teachers encounter in sustaining student interest through innovation, and what strategies do they use to address them? By treating innovation as a multidimensional practice encompassing methods, media, strategies, and contextual framing, rather than restricting the analysis to a single instructional model, the study aims to offer a more comprehensive account that can inform both the theory and the practice of PAI instruction.

6
2.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design, chosen because the research aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the forms of pedagogical innovation that PAI teachers implement to address low learning interest among eleventh-grade students at SMA Islam El Syihab, Bandar Lampung. A qualitative approach allows the phenomenon to be understood comprehensively through the experiences, perspectives, and interactions of informants within their natural setting.

The study was conducted at SMA Islam El Syihab, Bandar Lampung. The site was selected purposively because the school had already implemented a range of PAI learning innovations aimed at increasing student interest, making it relevant to the research focus. Participants were selected through purposive sampling — the deliberate selection of informants based on their relevance to the research needs. The PAI teacher served as the primary informant, while eleventh-grade students directly involved in the learning process served as supporting informants.

Primary data were obtained through classroom observation and in-depth interviews with the teacher and student informants. Secondary data were obtained from supporting documents, including lesson plans, school archives, and photographic records of learning activities related to the implementation of PAI innovation. Observation was used to capture how PAI innovation was enacted in the classroom; in-depth interviews were used to explore the forms of innovation implemented, students' learning interest, and the challenges and efforts teachers undertook to address low interest; and documentation was used to corroborate and strengthen the data obtained from observation and interviews.

Data were analyzed using an interactive model comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2020). During data condensation, the researchers selected and focused on data relevant to the research objectives. The condensed data were then presented in narrative form to facilitate interpretation, and conclusions were drawn and continuously verified against the findings throughout the analysis process.

The credibility of the data was established through source triangulation and method triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from the teacher and student informants, while method triangulation involved comparing data obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation. The use of triangulation was intended to strengthen the credibility and validity of the data so that the research findings could be scientifically justified.

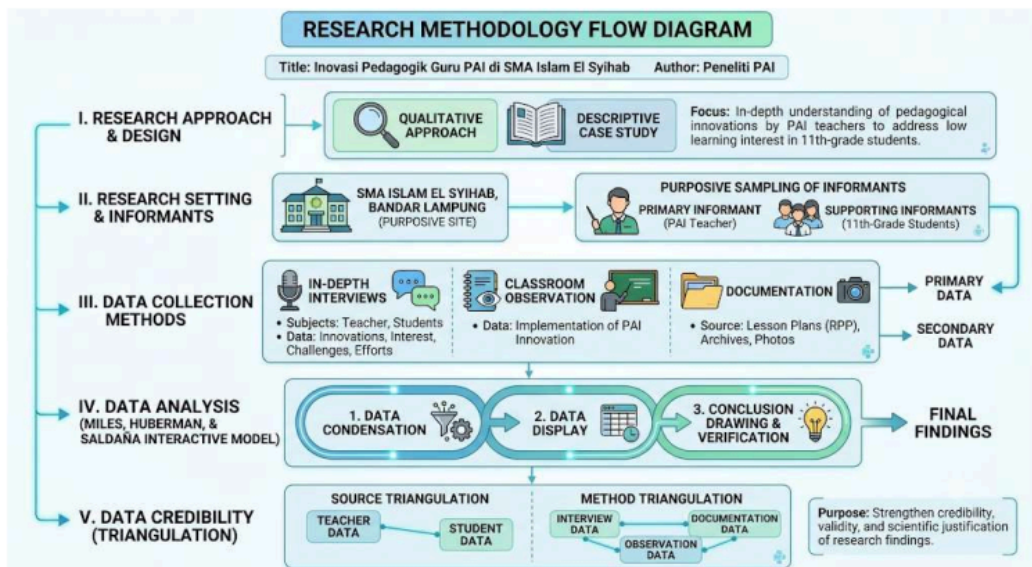


Figure 1. Research Flow

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings are organized around the three research questions guiding this study: the forms of pedagogical innovation implemented by the PAI teacher, students' learning

interest in response to these innovations, and the challenges and strategies associated with their implementation.

Forms of Pedagogical Innovation Implemented by the Teacher

Observation and interview data show that the PAI teacher combined several forms of innovation rather than relying on a single method. These included group discussion, case studies, collaborative projects, presentations, and creative assignments such as infographic posters. The teacher also used digital media — among them PowerPoint, Canva, YouTube, Kahoot! an LED television, and a projector — to clarify content and increase the appeal of instruction. Lessons commonly opened with an ice-breaking activity to draw students' focus and closed with a reward-based quiz to keep the classroom atmosphere lively. In addition, the teacher connected PAI material to contemporary issues and to students' personal experience so that the content would feel more relevant to their daily lives. Table 1 summarizes these forms of innovation by category.

Table 1. Forms of pedagogical innovation identified at SMA Islam El Syihab

Category	Forms identified
Active-learning methods	Group discussion, case studies, collaborative projects, presentations
Creative assignments	Infographic posters and other creative tasks
Digital media and technology	PowerPoint, Canva, YouTube, Kahoot!, LED television, projector
Classroom climate strategies	Ice-breaking activities, reward-based quizzes
Contextual linkage	Connecting PAI content to contemporary issues and students' personal experience

Taken together, these practices indicate that innovation in this setting was multidimensional, combining active methods, digital media, student creativity, and contextual framing rather than any single technique applied in isolation.

Student Learning Interest in Response to the Innovations

Interview data from students indicate that most regarded PAI instruction as reasonably engaging when the teacher varied her methods, particularly through hands-on practice, reward-based quizzes, animation, infographics, and creative projects. Students' focus increased during interactive activities, visual media, or devotional practice, while sessions consisting mainly of presentation or extended lecturing tended to lower their attention and participation. Regarding the perceived difficulty of the material, students generally found PAI content manageable, although a smaller group reported confusion when the teacher's explanation was too brief. Engagement was most visible during discussion, question-and-answer exchanges, and hands-on practice, particularly when these activities allowed direct participation. Even so, these gains were not uniform across all students: some continued to disengage, especially during longer or more passive segments of a lesson.

- P: "Hello, thank you for taking the time to chat. I wanted to ask you a few questions about your experience studying Islamic Religious Education in class with the teacher. What do you think of learning Islamic Religious Education so far?"*
- S: "In general, it's quite fun and interesting, Sis. Especially when the teacher varies her teaching methods. We don't get bored because we're not just sitting there listening to lectures."*
- P: "So, what kind of varied teaching methods do you and your classmates like best in class?"*
- S: "The most fun is when there's hands-on practice or quizzes with prizes (reward-based). I also often use visual media, like animations, colorful infographics, or when we're asked to work on creative group projects. It helps us stay engaged in class."*
- P: "Can you describe a moment when you and your classmates really focused or, conversely, felt bored during class?"*
- S: "Our focus usually increases significantly during interactive activities, watching visual videos, or during hands-on worship practice. We feel involved. But honestly, when the session gets into a long group presentation or the teacher's lecture goes on too long, my students' attention immediately drops. Many start to lose focus and their participation decreases."*
- P: "In terms of the Islamic Religious Education material being taught, what do you think the level of difficulty is? Is it difficult to understand or not?"*
- S: "Actually, the material is generally still easy to follow and understand, Sis. However, sometimes we get a bit confused when the teacher's explanation is too brief or she quickly moves on to other topics. A small number of students often feel left behind in those sections."*
- P: "According to your observations in class, when are the students most active in responding?"*
- S: "They're most active during group discussions, Q&A sessions, and during the hands-on practice, Sis. Basically, activities that give us the freedom to participate physically or verbally are always lively and active."*
- P: "Did all the students in the class respond equally actively when the teacher introduced those innovations?"*
- S: "Not really, Sis. It wasn't the same for everyone. Most of them did become more enthusiastic, but there were still some who seemed indifferent or lost focus (disengaged). Especially during longer lesson periods or during passive activities, some would start daydreaming or playing by themselves."*
- P: "Okay, thank you very much for your answer. This information is very helpful in your research."*
- S: "You're welcome, Sir."*

Challenges and Teacher Strategies

Despite these gains, implementation was not free of difficulty. The main challenge reported by the teacher was variation in students' ability to grasp PAI content, which required balancing instruction between students who absorbed concepts quickly and those who needed additional support. Concentration was not always stable: some students appeared bored, inattentive, or drowsy, particularly during longer sessions held in the early afternoon. At the institutional level, limited instructional time constrained how many interactive activities could be carried out in a single session. In response, the

teacher relied on ice-breaking activities, reward-based quizzes, creative projects, small-group arrangements, and visual or digital media chosen for their relevance to students' everyday lives.

P: "Ma'am, now that we've discussed student responses to classroom innovations, let's examine them from your perspective as a teacher. While implementing these various pedagogical innovations, what are the main challenges you most often face in the field?"

G: "The main challenge actually lies in the heterogeneity or variation in students' abilities in grasping Islamic Religious Education material, Sir. Their ability to absorb concepts varies greatly. I have to be clever in balancing the teaching rhythm; how can I ensure that students who are quick to respond don't get bored because they have to wait too long, while also ensuring that students who need extra support (slow learners) don't feel left behind or frustrated."

P: "So, what about the dynamics of student conditions or focus within the classroom itself, Ma'am?"

G: "Well, that's it. These children's concentration isn't always stable throughout each lesson. Sometimes some students seem bored, inattentive, or even sleepy. This phenomenon of drowsiness and lethargy most often occurs when Islamic Religious Education lessons are scheduled in the middle of the day or after the second break. Long session durations exacerbate this situation."

P: "From an institutional or school facility perspective, are there any specific obstacles that limit your room for innovation?"

G: "From an institutional perspective, the biggest obstacle is the very limited allocation of instructional time. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) class hours are limited, and if we want to use ideal interactive methods, it takes a long time. As a result, I'm often limited to executing all planned interactive activities in one session."

P: "That's interesting. Faced with these challenges—ranging from differences in ability, focus issues, and time constraints, what adaptive strategies did you ultimately implement?"

G: "I try to respond flexibly and tactically, Sir. To address children who are sleepy and tired during the day, I regularly incorporate icebreakers into the middle of lessons. I also regularly use reward-based quizzes (small prizes) to stimulate adrenaline and healthy competition, so they stay alert."

P: "What are your strategies for overcoming differences in learning speed and time constraints, Ma'am?"

G: "To bridge the gap in understanding, I implemented a small-group arrangement strategy. Within the groups, I mixed students who understood quickly with those who did not, creating peer tutoring. Additionally, I shifted the class load by assigning group creative projects that could be completed in installments. I also deliberately chose visual and digital media that were very close and relevant to their everyday lives, so that the dense material could be readily absorbed without the need for lengthy theoretical explanations."

P: "Okay, that's an excellent adaptive strategy you've implemented. Thank you very much for your time and sharing this invaluable experience, Ma'am."

G: "You're welcome, Sir. I hope it's useful for your research."

Discussion

These findings, considered together, suggest that low interest in PAI is shaped less by the subject matter itself than by how it is packaged, the timing of instruction, and the diversity of students' characteristics — a pattern that the following discussion sits within the relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

Innovation as a Multidimensional Pedagogical Strategy

The combination of active methods, digital media, creative assignments, and contextual framing observed at SMA Islam El Syihab is consistent with the PAIKEM concept, which treats active, innovative, creative, effective, and enjoyable learning as the basis for meaningful instructional experience. Discussion and case-study methods gave students room to construct understanding participatively, while digital media allowed the teacher to present religious content visually in a form that resonates with a generation accustomed to digital interaction. This pattern is broadly consistent with Indah (2024) and Zakwan et al. (2024), who likewise found that technology, interactive media, and collaborative activity strengthened student engagement with Islamic values, although the present study extends this work by documenting how several forms of innovation operate together rather than examining any single method in isolation. Read this way, the forms of innovation identified here function less as incidental technical variation and more as a deliberate pedagogical strategy for building attention, participation, and an enjoyable learning experience—one that gives PAI instruction a foothold for addressing the eleventh graders' low interest documented at the outset of the study.

Student Interest through the Lens of Interest and Flow Theory

The rise in attention and participation reported by students aligns with Mazid et al. (2026) and Rathunde's (2025) account of learning interest as attraction and engagement that arises without compulsion, and it also resonates with Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, which emphasizes focused attention, a balance between ability and challenge, and full absorption in an activity. Students appeared to enter this state more readily when material was not delivered verbally alone but were tied to practice, visualization, and collaborative activity, a pattern that several prior studies report in comparable settings (Sari et al., 2022; Safroni & Hidayah, 2024). At the same time, the unevenness noted in the results—where engagement rose for some students but not others—indicates that the balance between ability and challenge emphasized by flow theory was not achieved consistently across the class, a point that bears directly on the challenges discussed next.

Adaptive Responses to Implementation Challenges

The challenges identified in this study uneven comprehension, fluctuating concentration, and limited instructional time indicate that sustaining student interest in PAI requires more than introducing varied methods; it requires reading and responding to the psychological and situational conditions of the classroom as they change from one session to the next. This finding is consistent with Zamzami et al. (2025), who linked

low interest in PAI to weak concentration and participation, and with [Safroni and Hidayah \(2024\)](#), who found that play, media, and reward can lift student enthusiasm. The teacher's reliance on grouping, visual and digital media, and interactive activity in response to these challenges suggests that effective innovation in this setting functioned adaptively rather than as a fixed set of techniques applied uniformly across all students and sessions ([Contrino et al., 2024](#); [Rincon-Flores et al., 2024](#)).

Implications

Theoretically, the findings extend prior single-model studies of PAI innovation by showing how multiple forms — active methods, digital media, creative assignments, and contextual framing — interact within one setting to shape student interest, rather than examining any one form in isolation. Practically, the findings suggest that PAI teachers benefit from treating innovation as an ongoing, adaptive process: reducing reliance on lecturing and passive presentation, varying instructional formats to suit shifting concentration levels across a session, and deliberately connecting religious content to students lived experience.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is limited by its single-site, qualitative case-study design, which yields rich, context-specific understanding but does not support statistical generalization to other schools or regions. Reliance on observation, interview, and documentation also means the findings reflect informants' perspectives and the researchers' interpretation rather than a standardized measure of interest or engagement. Future research could address these limitations through comparative case studies across multiple schools, quantitative or mixed method designs that measure the relationship between specific innovation models and learning outcomes, and longitudinal designs that track how student interest develops as innovations are sustained over time.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the pedagogical innovations that PAI teachers implement to address low learning interest among eleventh-grade students at SMA Islam El Syihab, Bandar Lampung, students' interest in response to these innovations, and the challenges and strategies associated with their implementation. The findings show that teachers moved beyond teacher-centered delivery by combining group discussion, case studies, collaborative projects, digital media, hands-on practice, ice-breaking activities, reward-based quizzes, and the deliberate linking of PAI content to everyday issues, demonstrating that religious instruction need not remain purely normative and text-bound but can be delivered as a lived, reflective, and applicable learning experience.

These innovations were associated with higher attention, participation, enthusiasm, and enjoyment among students, particularly when instruction involved practice, visual media, quizzes, creative projects, and direct interaction. However, these gains were not uniform: they were moderated by differences in student ability, fluctuating concentration, instructional time, and a tendency toward disengagement during more

passive activities. This suggests that learning innovation is effective in promoting interest, but its effectiveness depends substantially on teachers' capacity to adapt their strategies to classroom conditions.

Taken together, these findings indicate that PAI learning innovation needs to be developed continuously and adaptively rather than treated as a fixed set of media or methods. Teachers benefit from ongoing reflection on student response, careful matching of strategy to content, and a sustained balance between enjoyable activity and the attainment of instructional objectives. Future research could test the comparative effectiveness of specific innovation models, develop PAIKEM-based PAI learning instruments, or use quantitative designs to measure, at a broader scale, the relationship between learning innovation and student interest and outcomes.

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