



Utilizing Reading Competitions to Foster Academic Skill Development Among Pesantren Students

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to examine the role of the kitab reading competition at a pesantren in enhancing students' academic skills, including cognitive abilities and self-management. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected through observations and in-depth interviews with caretakers, committee members, and students. The findings reveal that the competition plays a crucial role in transforming the students' learning processes. Unlike traditional classroom settings that sometimes lead to a decline in motivation, the reading competition, with its lottery-based system and reward incentives, encourages students to engage more seriously and holistically with their studies. Students are not only required to memorize texts but also to critically analyze and apply them in everyday life. This competition, therefore, serves as both an evaluation tool and a platform for fostering academic proficiency, intellectual development, and self-directed learning. The study highlights the effectiveness of this approach in improving students' academic skills and motivation in pesantren settings.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of academic skills in the context of Islamic education is becoming increasingly relevant, especially as society places greater value on intellectual capacity and critical thinking. Islamic educational institutions, such as pesantren, hold a unique role in cultivating intellectual abilities, particularly through the mastery of classical texts known as kitab kuning. The development of academic skills, including comprehension, analysis, and application of knowledge, is crucial for students' personal and academic growth (Hefniy & Alwahedi, 2025; Khofsah, 2025). In a broader context, this research is important for understanding how traditional educational practices contribute to developing well-rounded individuals who are capable of engaging with both religious and secular knowledge. By exploring this topic, we gain insights into how pesantren can serve as an effective model for fostering academic excellence while

preserving traditional learning methods, aligning with societal demands for intellectual growth.

The challenge faced by pesantren students today is not only the memorization of kitab kuning texts but also the ability to understand and critically analyze them in depth (Lawal, 2024; Rodliyah & Khusnuridlo, 2024). This gap between memorization and intellectual engagement has led to concerns about whether the traditional learning methods in pesantren are adequately preparing students for the complexities of modern academic environments. While students are expected to master the classical texts, the pressure to memorize can overshadow the development of critical thinking and analytical skills. Moreover, many pesantren lack a structured mechanism to evaluate and foster academic skills beyond rote memorization (Hikmah & Mudarris, 2026; Holidi, 2025; Kusumawati, 2025). This research aims to address this issue by exploring how the kitab reading competition can serve as a means of enhancing the academic skills of students in pesantren, specifically focusing on its effectiveness in developing cognitive and intellectual abilities.

At Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qadim, a regular kitab reading competition has become a key educational practice aimed at improving students' academic skills. However, there is a concern that the competition might merely be a routine activity, lacking the necessary academic rigor to truly enhance intellectual capacities (Manshur, 2026; Shoha, 2026). While it does motivate students to engage with the texts, the focus on memorization and spontaneous explanation often does not go beyond surface-level knowledge (Rahman, 2026; Syafiih, 2025). This phenomenon raises the question of whether such competitions genuinely contribute to the development of academic skills or if they remain limited to traditional learning methods without fostering deeper comprehension. The research will examine how this competition affects the ability of students to understand and apply the content of kitab kuning in a way that is meaningful and intellectually enriching.

Previous studies, such as the work by Rofiqoh et al. (2025) in *Peran Musabaqoh Qiroatul Kutub dalam Meningkatkan Motivasi Belajar Kitab Kuning*, have explored the role of competitions in motivating students to engage with kitab kuning. These studies highlight the positive effects of competitions on student enthusiasm and their commitment to learning. However, they primarily focus on motivation and do not thoroughly address how this motivation translates into tangible academic skills, such as critical thinking, comprehension, and application of knowledge. The gap in the existing literature is clear: while motivation is an essential factor, the connection between motivation and actual academic skill development in the context of kitab kuning reading competitions has not been adequately explored.

In line with this, studies on pesantren education, such as those by Salam et al. (2025) and Nurfauzi & Maula (2025), discuss the role of kitab kuning in

shaping intellectual traditions. While these studies emphasize the importance of Islamic textual study, they do not focus on how specific practices, like reading competitions, foster academic skills in a measurable way. Therefore, the existing body of research lacks a comprehensive analysis of how competitions can be structured to enhance deeper understanding and academic proficiency in pesantren students (Maulidia, 2023; Sanjani & Fahmi, 2023; Zuhdi & Faridy, 2024). This study fills this gap by examining the practical outcomes of such competitions on students' academic abilities, providing a clearer picture of how these educational practices impact academic performance.

This research introduces a novel perspective by examining the kitab reading competition not only as a motivational tool but also as a mechanism for the development of tangible academic skills. By exploring how the competition impacts students' abilities to analyze, comprehend, and apply kitab kuning texts, this study offers new insights into how traditional educational methods can be optimized for modern academic demands. The findings from this research are significant for pesantren education, as they provide evidence-based recommendations on how to enhance the effectiveness of such competitions in fostering academic excellence. Additionally, this study contributes to the broader discourse on the intersection of traditional and modern educational practices, demonstrating how pesantren can adapt to meet the intellectual needs of students in the 21st century.

The main research question addressed in this study is: How does the kitab reading competition at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qadim contribute to the development of students' academic skills? The preliminary answer to this question suggests that the competition plays a crucial role in enhancing not only students' memorization abilities but also their cognitive skills, including analysis, comprehension, and application. By introducing a structured evaluation mechanism, the competition provides a platform for students to demonstrate their academic competencies in a meaningful way. This research argues that, contrary to the belief that such competitions are simply routine practices, they serve as a powerful tool for developing critical academic skills that are essential for students' intellectual growth and future success. The contribution of this study lies in its ability to showcase how traditional educational practices can be transformed to meet the demands of modern academic performance.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative case study design, chosen for its ability to provide an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of developing academic skills among students through the kitab reading competition at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qadim (Fahmi, 2024; Niam et al., 2024; Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). A case study is particularly suitable as it allows the researcher to focus on a specific instance of a larger social context, enabling a detailed understanding of

the academic practices and dynamics within the pesantren. The case study design also facilitates the analysis of real-life phenomena within its natural setting, thus providing rich insights into the educational processes at this pesantren.

The research is conducted at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qadim, located in Kalikajar Kulon, Paiton, Probolinggo. This pesantren was selected due to its long-standing tradition of organizing kitab reading competitions, which serve as a unique method for developing academic skills among its students (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023; Meydan & Akkaş, 2024; Mulyana et al., 2024). The choice of location is based on the pesantren's commitment to preserving traditional Islamic education while integrating academic skill development through such competitions. Additionally, the distinct cultural and educational context of this pesantren makes it an ideal site for investigating how kitab kuning study and related competitions contribute to the academic growth of students.

Data for this study was collected through a combination of observation and in-depth interviews. The researcher, acting as the primary instrument, was directly involved in the fieldwork to capture the socio-cultural context of the pesantren. The study employed purposive sampling to select informants, including caretakers, committee members, and students, based on their involvement in or knowledge about the kitab reading competition. This approach ensured that the selected participants could provide rich, relevant insights into the process and impact of the competition on students' academic skills. Observations and interviews allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the direct and indirect influences of the competition.

Data analysis followed a systematic process involving data condensation, reduction, display, and verification. Initially, the raw data from interviews and observations were condensed and reduced to identify key themes and patterns. This was followed by the display of the data in a clear and organized manner, allowing the researcher to observe relationships and trends that emerged from the data (Nurfajriani et al., 2024; Pregoner, 2024). Finally, the data were verified by cross-checking findings with the informants and through a continuous process of reflection and comparison. This rigorous analysis ensured that the conclusions drawn from the data were valid and reflective of the real academic experiences of the students in Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qadim.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preparation and Mentoring Process

The kitab reading competition at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qadim is a routine event aimed at testing the students' mastery of kitab kuning texts, such as Fathul Qarib or Fathul Mu'in. This activity serves not only as a competition but also as an evaluation tool to assess how well students understand the

grammatical rules (*nahwu-sharaf*) and the deep meanings embedded in the texts. Observations revealed that the competition preparation involves close cooperation between students and their mentors (*mustahiq*). A more intensive learning atmosphere was observed in the *pesantren* as the competition day approached. One *mustahiq* explained:

"We guide the students so that they are not only fluent in reading but truly understand the logical flow of the text. So, when they are asked by the judges, they already have the foundation." This approach mirrors the concept of scaffolding, where gradual support is provided to help students achieve a higher level of understanding (Nasrullah, 2025).

Competition Mechanism and Authentic Assessment

The competition utilizes a lottery system to determine which part of the text each student will read in front of the judges. This system ensures that students cannot focus solely on mastering specific sections, making the assessment process more objective. One committee member stated that the lottery system forces students to prepare for the entire *kitab*, as they do not know which chapter will be tested. This mechanism aligns with the principles of authentic assessment, where the exam is designed to measure the students' actual ability to engage with unspecified texts in a comprehensive way (Zulfiah, 2025).

During the competition, the researcher observed a dialectical interaction between the judges and students, involving three key stages: reading the text, explaining its meaning (*murad*), and responding to questions. Although the judges made detailed corrections, the process remained educational, allowing for the development of critical thinking, as students were required to defend their analysis of the text. A notable shift in student motivation was also observed. Initially, many students felt burdened by the competition as it was a prerequisite for holiday leave, but over time, their motivation changed to personal pride when they successfully responded to the judges' challenges. This shift from external motivation (*rules*) to intrinsic motivation (*achievement satisfaction*) demonstrates that the competition effectively serves as a platform for self-actualization for students (Rahmawati et al., 2025).

The Role of Kitab Reading Competition as a Tool for Developing Santri's Impact on Student Motivation and Self-Management

The systematic and objective execution of the competition directly influences the improvement of students' intellectual quality and academic skills at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qadim. Interviews with committee members

revealed that the kitab reading competition has a much greater impact than regular classroom learning. It was explained that motivation in the classroom often fluctuates, but the competitive atmosphere of the event, combined with reward incentives, significantly boosts students' enthusiasm. This phenomenon suggests that the competition contributes to the development of students' self-management skills, as they independently regulate their time and discipline to achieve the best results (Putri, 2024).

Cognitive Skills Development

In addition to motivating students, the competition also sharpens their cognitive skills, particularly critical thinking and deep analysis. Students are not merely expected to know the content of the text but are required to understand it in depth and apply it to real-life situations. The process of analyzing how the teachings of classical texts can be applied in modern contexts necessitates strong analytical skills, consistent with the concept of critical thinking that actively processes information (Irfan et al., 2025). Furthermore, students' text analysis skills improve significantly as they are taught to read the kitab according to the proper grammatical rules, which form the foundation of academic competence in the pesantren.

Positive Pressure and Intellectual Growth

The researcher argues that the success of the competition lies in the positive pressure it generates, which is absent in regular classroom learning. In class, students may not feel burdened if they fail to master a chapter, but in the competition setting, there is intellectual pride and responsibility before the judges and their peers. This pressure compels students to shift from mere memorization to truly understanding the material holistically. Therefore, the kitab reading competition at Nurul Qadim has proven to be an effective tool for honing intellectual skills that are often not fully developed through conventional learning (Zulfiah, 2025). The shift from compliance with rules to a desire for achievement underscores that the competition can create a more vibrant academic ecosystem within the pesantren.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the kitab reading competition at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qadim plays a significant role in enhancing the academic skills of the students. The strict implementation system, such as the lottery for material and dialectical questioning, forces students to master the kitab in its entirety, rather than just memorizing specific sections. The

study also reveals that the competition serves as a solution to the fluctuating motivation of students in the classroom. The combination of rewards and positive pressure during the competition effectively boosts students' learning enthusiasm and self-management skills, such as time management and discipline. Overall, the competition aligns pesantren rules with the students' intrinsic motivation, leading to a higher level of cognitive understanding and proficiency in deeply analyzing classical texts. However, the research has limitations, including the focus on only one pesantren and the limited scope of participant perspectives. Future research could explore how similar competitions in different pesantren contexts might influence academic skills, with a broader participant base and a more diverse range of educational settings.

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