

Enhancing Islamic studies learning through card sort: A case study in *Aqīdah Akhlāq* and *Al-Qur’ān Ḥadīth* instruction

Fadhilla Nangroe Anggraini
Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta
E-mail: o100240030@student.ums.ac.id

Salsabila Septiana Putri
Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta
Email: g000210189@student.ums.ac.id

Triono Ali Mustofa
Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta
Email: tam763@ums.ac.id

Abstract

The card sort method is an instructional strategy that promotes active student engagement by encouraging the categorization and organization of key concepts. Widely applied across various subjects, this method has demonstrated its potential to enhance student participation and comprehension. This study investigates the implementation of the card sort method in teaching *‘Aqīdah Akhlāq* (Islamic Creed and Morals) for Grade 7 and *Al-Qur’ān Ḥadīth* for Grade 8 at *Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri* (MTsN) 2 Surakarta. The method was chosen for its interactive and collaborative nature, which fosters greater student involvement. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal that the card sort method effectively aids Grade 7 students in systematically grasping and classifying moral values and religious doctrines in *‘Aqīdah Akhlāq*. Similarly, it supports Grade 8 students in *Al-Qur’ān Ḥadīth* classes by enhancing their ability to identify, connect, and contextualize relevant Qur’anic verses and Hadiths. The study concludes that the card sort method is a valuable pedagogical tool for Islamic Studies instruction, though modifications may be necessary to align with the varying levels of content complexity across different grade levels.

Keywords: Active learning, card sort method, Islamic education, *‘Aqīdah Akhlāq*, *Al-Qur’ān Ḥadīth*

How to cite: Anggraini, F. N., Putri, S.S., & Mustofa, T. A. (2025). Enhancing Islamic studies learning through card sort: A case study in *Aqīdah Akhlāq* and *Al-Qur’ān Ḥadīth* instruction. *Tadibia Islamika*, 5(1), 23-30. <https://doi.org/10.28918/tadibia.v5i1.10353>

Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in Indonesian madrasahs is divided into several subject areas, including *Al-Qur’ān Ḥadīth*, *‘Aqīdah Akhlāq*, *Fiqh*, and Islamic Cultural History. Each subject is taught by educators who specialize in the respective fields, bringing their own pedagogical styles and instructional strategies to the classroom. Effective learning, however, requires more than subject expertise—it demands thoughtful preparation, including the

selection of suitable teaching methods, instructional media, and learning modules. Among these, teaching methods play a crucial role in shaping student understanding and engagement.

As emphasized by Winarno (in Suryosubroto), instructional methods are technical strategies used to facilitate knowledge transfer and ensure meaningful interaction between teachers and students. Without appropriate methods, teaching may fail to inspire or engage students, reducing the learning experience to a mere formality. Therefore, educators must select instructional approaches that align with students' needs, learning objectives, and contextual environments (Rahyu Dwi & M. Rafique, 2023).

Learning, according to Mulyasa (2004), is essentially an interaction between students and their environment that leads to positive behavioral change. In this context, the teacher acts as a facilitator who creates opportunities for students to acquire knowledge, develop skills, and build strong character. Sudjana (2005) further emphasizes that the effectiveness of teaching lies in the teacher's ability to promote active participation and foster a dynamic learning environment. When the learning process is student-centered, with learners actively constructing knowledge, the educational interaction becomes more impactful (Nurjan, 2015).

One such method that aligns with these pedagogical ideals is the Card Sort technique. This interactive approach encourages students to classify concepts, express ideas, and engage in collaborative discussions. Research by Syofyan (2021) found that the Card Sort method positively influenced student achievement in Sociology at SMAN 5 Batanghari. Similarly, Aminarseh (2018) reported notable improvements in learning outcomes across instructional cycles, increased student engagement, and enhanced collaboration in classroom settings.

Further studies support the effectiveness of Card Sort in diverse educational contexts. Herwin, Husin, and Rahmawati (2021) observed heightened motivation and enthusiasm among students using this method at MTs Nabil Husein. Haddar (2017) noted its impact on students' social interaction, communication, and independence, while Fitriani (2020) highlighted its role in increasing interest and participation. Hasanah and Wahyuni (n.d.) also reported improvements in cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor domains through this method, demonstrating its holistic benefits. Ritonga et al. (2024) emphasized its utility in classroom management and social development, and Suratmi (n.d.) recorded enhanced learning outcomes in moral education at the elementary level.

Likewise, Mufidah, Antika, and Santoso (2020) found that Card Sort enhanced student activity, understanding, and enthusiasm in learning Islamic values such as honesty and *istiqāmah*. These findings affirm the relevance of the Card Sort method in Islamic Education.

Given this background, the present study investigates: (1) the effectiveness and advantages of implementing the Card Sort method in teaching *'Aqīdah Akhlāq* for Grade 7 and *Al-Qur'ān Ḥadīṣ* for Grade 8 at MTsN 2 Surakarta; and (2) the differences in its application between the two subjects. This study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge on active learning strategies in Islamic Religious Education and to offer insights into method adaptation across grade levels and content areas.

Method

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design to examine the effectiveness of the Card Sort method in teaching *'Aqīdah Akhlāq* (Islamic Theology and Ethics) to seventh-grade students and *al-Ḥadīth wa al-Qur'ān* to eighth-grade students at MTsN 2 Surakarta. A qualitative descriptive approach was selected due to its strength in providing holistic, context-rich insights into educational settings, allowing researchers to understand classroom dynamics, patterns of student engagement, and learning processes in their natural environments (Creswell

& Poth, 2018). This non-interventionist method enabled detailed exploration of how the Card Sort technique was applied and interpreted by both teachers and learners.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at MTsN 2 Surakarta, an Islamic junior high school recognized for integrating religious instruction with general education. Participants included two student cohorts: seventh-grade learners enrolled in the *'Aqīdah Akhlāq* course and eighth-grade learners studying *al-Ḥadīth wa al-Qur'ān*. The seventh-grade group comprised approximately 30 students aged 12–13 years, while the eighth-grade group included around 32 students aged 13–14 years. Both groups represented varied learning profiles, reflecting the school's diverse student body. These grades and subjects were deliberately chosen as they form foundational stages in the religious education curriculum where core moral teachings and scriptural studies are introduced.

Data Collection Methods

To ensure comprehensive and trustworthy findings, the research employed methodological triangulation through the following qualitative techniques: classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

Classroom Observations were conducted during the implementation of the Card Sort method in both *'Aqīdah Akhlāq* and *al-Ḥadīth wa al-Qur'ān* lessons. Researchers recorded detailed field notes on student behaviors, group interactions, cognitive engagement, and instructional strategies. Special attention was paid to how learners manipulated the cards, collaborated in decision-making, and responded to teacher prompts. Observational data also included challenges such as classroom noise levels and time constraints.

Semi-Structured Interviews were held with selected students and subject teachers to gather deeper perspectives on their experiences. Students were asked about their comprehension, engagement, group collaboration, and any learning difficulties. Teachers shared their views on preparation, instructional techniques, perceived outcomes, and implementation barriers.

Document Analysis involved reviewing teaching materials, lesson plans, student worksheets, and assessment results. This supported triangulation by offering additional insight into how the Card Sort method was embedded into the instructional flow and its influence on student learning.

Implementation of the Card Sort Method

The Card Sort activity was integrated into instructional sessions through a multi-phase process designed to maximize interaction and higher-order thinking:

First, Preparation Phase: Teachers developed card sets featuring essential concepts, terminologies, verses from the Qur'ān, and excerpts from ḥadīth, tailored to each subject. For *'Aqīdah Akhlāq*, cards included values such as *ṣidq* (honesty), *amānah* (trustworthiness), and *ṣifāt Allāh* (Divine attributes). In *al-Qur'ān Ḥadīth*, materials included thematic selections on generosity, sincerity, and faith.

Second, Orientation Phase: Each session began with a brief explanation of the topic, followed by clear instructions on the Card Sort procedure. Students were divided into small collaborative groups of four or five to foster active dialogue.

Third, Sorting Phase: Groups received shuffled cards and were tasked with categorizing them based on conceptual or thematic alignment. This required prior knowledge recall, inferential reasoning, and consensus-building among group members. The tangible aspect of card handling helped reinforce attention and facilitated active learning.

Fourth, Presentation Phase: Each group shared its categorization results, explaining their rationale and engaging in class-wide feedback. Teachers used this opportunity to correct misconceptions and deepen discussion around the central themes.

Fifth, Feedback Phase: Formative feedback was delivered throughout and after the activity. Teachers emphasized critical thinking, communication, and mastery of content. Further assessments included oral questioning, mini quizzes, and student reflections to evaluate understanding.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically in line with qualitative descriptive procedures. Observation notes, interview transcripts, and instructional documents were coded to identify recurring patterns related to engagement, comprehension, group dynamics, and implementation barriers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were repeatedly reviewed to refine themes and ensure interpretation accuracy. Emerging themes were then organized to answer the research questions, drawing attention to both strengths and challenges of the method.

To enhance validity, triangulation was applied by comparing findings across different sources. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary analyses with participating teachers, allowing for validation and refinement based on practitioner feedback.

Results

The implementation of the Card Sort method in the teaching of *'Aqīdah Akhlāq* for seventh-grade students and *al-Qur'ān Ḥadīth* for eighth-grade students at MTsN 2 Surakarta demonstrated substantial positive effects on student engagement, comprehension, memorization, critical thinking, and collaboration. This section presents detailed findings based on classroom observations, interviews with students and teachers, and document analysis, emphasizing how the method shaped both the instructional process and learning outcomes.

Table 1

Observed Outcomes and Challenges of the Card Sort Learning Method

Aspect	Observed Outcomes
Student Engagement	Increased active participation, enthusiasm, and collaborative discussion
Understanding and Memorization	Enhanced conceptual clarity and improved retention of Qur'anic verses and Hadith
Critical Thinking	Development of analytical skills through categorization, comparison, and synthesis
Collaboration	Strengthened communication, negotiation, and teamwork skills
Challenges	Classroom noise, preparation time; mitigated through structured management and teacher facilitation

Application of the Card Sort Method in 'Aqīdah Akhlāq and Al-Qur'ān Ḥadīth Classes

In *'Aqīdah Akhlāq*, students were divided into small groups and provided with cards containing moral concepts, divine attributes (*ṣifāt wājib Allāh*), and Islamic ethical principles. Students categorized the cards under appropriate themes, such as "Obligatory Attributes of Allāh" or "Moral Conduct in Daily Life." This required them to activate prior knowledge, assess relevance, and collaborate to determine correct classifications. The tactile, visual

interaction with cards made abstract theological content more concrete and comprehensible (Rusman, 2011).

In *al-Qur'ān Ḥadīth*, the cards featured selected verses and ḥadīths related to key topics such as generosity (*al-karam*), honesty (*al-ṣidq*), and faith (*īmān*). Students were tasked with arranging the verses in logical or chronological order or grouping *ḥadīths* by thematic content. This method not only facilitated memorization but also deepened understanding by encouraging students to explore textual relationships and meanings. Teachers played a crucial role in facilitating the activity, offering scaffolding and formative feedback throughout (Rosyidi, 2008).

Student Engagement and Participation

Classroom observations indicated a notable rise in student participation during Card Sort sessions compared to traditional lecture formats. Students were visibly more engaged, often debating card placement within their groups and maintaining focus due to the hands-on nature of the task. This multisensory experience helped sustain attention and reduced classroom monotony.

One student commented, “Sorting the cards made it easier to remember because I could touch and see the ideas, and discussing with friends helped me understand better.” Teachers echoed this sentiment, noting a livelier classroom environment and a higher level of student initiative. These outcomes support prior findings that active learning approaches foster motivation and cognitive engagement.

Improvements in Understanding and Memorization

The Card Sort method significantly enhanced students’ understanding and memory of religious material. In *‘Aqīdah Akhlāq*, the visual and group-based classification of concepts helped students internalize complex theological ideas and connect them to practical behavior. In *al-Qur'ān Ḥadīth*, memorization improved as students reconstructed verse sequences, supported by physical interaction with the cards and collaborative reasoning.

The method helped break down long verses into manageable segments and reduced reliance on rote repetition. As a result, students recalled content with greater accuracy and confidence, affirming earlier research suggesting that tactile and cooperative learning improves retention and comprehension in religious education contexts.

Development of Critical Thinking and Collaboration Skills

Card Sort activities encouraged students to engage in higher-order thinking, such as comparing concepts, analyzing content relationships, and synthesizing information. This aligns with the educational goal of cultivating critical thinking within Islamic studies.

Moreover, group interaction fostered valuable interpersonal skills. Students practiced negotiation, listened to differing opinions, and collectively arrived at conclusions. Teachers reported that this shifted their instructional role from direct teaching to facilitating autonomous, student-centered learning.

Challenges Encountered and Mitigation Strategies

Despite the benefits, two main challenges emerged. First, the noise level during group activities occasionally interfered with focus. Second, preparing card materials demanded additional teacher time and planning. These issues were addressed through structured classroom management, including the implementation of time limits, clear behavioral expectations, and optimized seating arrangements.

Teachers also emphasized the importance of being well-prepared and familiar with the material to offer timely and accurate feedback. Regular monitoring and positive reinforcement were found effective in maintaining classroom discipline and maximizing engagement (Rusman, 2011; Rosyidi, 2008).

Discussion

The Card Sort learning model proves to be highly effective in refocusing students' attention on the subject matter. According to Siberman, as cited in Miftahul Huda's work, the Card Sort model offers several advantages: a) teachers can easily manage the classroom, b) the method is easy to implement, c) it facilitates organized classroom management, d) it is applicable to large groups of students, e) it enables teachers to provide clearer explanations, making it easier for students to grasp the material, f) it increases student enthusiasm for learning, and g) it fosters social interaction among students, strengthening their interpersonal relationships (Huda, 2013).

In applying the Card Sort method to the subject of *Al-Qur'ān Hadīth*, its suitability is evident due to the nature of the subject, which emphasizes mastery of basic competencies such as memorizing *Qur'ānic* verses and *Hadīth*, as well as understanding their brief explanations and content. This alignment makes the Card Sort method highly appropriate for these subjects. Based on this, it can be concluded that implementing the Card Sort method in *Al-Qur'ān Hadīth* learning effectively assists teachers in classroom management and facilitates students' learning processes, thereby making the learning experience more enjoyable.

Meanwhile, in the context of the Moral Beliefs (*Akīdah Akhlāq*) subject for class 7A2 at MTsN 2 Surakarta, the learning method used plays a crucial role in students' academic success, especially when tailored to specific materials. The application of the Card Sort method in learning Moral Beliefs, particularly in the material concerning the recognition of the obligatory attributes of Allah, showed significant improvements in students' understanding and engagement. This method encourages active student participation by having them group cards containing key concepts from the lesson. Such activities stimulate students' memory and help them establish connections between concepts, fostering a deeper and more meaningful comprehension. According to Rosyidah and Fitriyani (2020), active learning methods like Card Sort positively impact students' cognitive achievements in Moral Beliefs.

During implementation, teachers divide students into small groups, each receiving a set of cards to categorize. The group discussions prompt students to exchange ideas and justify their grouping choices, enriching their insights into the *Akīdah Akhlāq* material. The results from class 7A2 also demonstrate that using the Card Sort method significantly enhances students' critical thinking skills. Students are required not only to absorb information passively but also to evaluate and critique the relevance of the information presented. Facilitating students' understanding of subject matter and classification concepts is a core objective of this method.

It is expected that Card Sort will increase students' motivation to learn, while teachers take on a more facilitative role (Tri & Jumawan, 2024). For instance, when deciding the placement of a concept, students must consider its appropriateness to the category and its relation to other concepts previously placed. Additionally, this method nurtures collaboration skills, as students must work together to reach consensus. The learning process thus becomes more interactive and dynamic, resulting in higher student motivation and engagement. Hence, Card Sort functions not only as a learning tool but also as a means to develop students' social and intellectual skills, which are vital in studying Moral Beliefs.

However, a significant challenge encountered is the less conducive classroom environment. Noise and distractions impede optimal learning and reduce the effectiveness of the Card Sort method. These issues can cause students to lose focus, require more individual attention, and necessitate longer preparation times (Ritonga, Zuraida, Agustina, Mustika, &

Jumawan, 2024). To address these challenges, several practical strategies are recommended: creating a positive and supportive physical learning environment, establishing and enforcing clear classroom rules to regulate behavior, and applying active learning techniques that directly engage students. Effective time management through structured activity planning and positive reinforcement for good behavior are also essential. Furthermore, building strong relationships with students helps to foster a supportive classroom atmosphere conducive to learning.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Card Sort method is an effective active learning strategy for enhancing student engagement, understanding, and critical thinking in teaching Akidah Akhlāq and *Hadīth* at MTsN 2 Surakarta. The method's interactive and collaborative nature successfully transformed traditional, passive learning environments into dynamic spaces where students actively constructed knowledge through tactile and social interaction. By physically sorting cards containing key concepts, *Qur'ānic* verses, and *Hadīth* texts, students were able to deepen their comprehension, improve memorization, and develop critical analytical skills essential for meaningful religious education. These findings align with broader educational research highlighting the benefits of active learning in fostering motivation, retention, and higher-order thinking.

Practically, the Card Sort method facilitated a more student-centered classroom, where learners were encouraged to discuss, negotiate, and reflect collaboratively on religious content. This approach not only enhanced cognitive outcomes but also nurtured social skills such as communication, teamwork, and respect for diverse perspectives—competencies crucial in today's pluralistic educational contexts (Piersol, n.d.; Reyell, n.d.). The method's adaptability across various content complexities—from the moral attributes discussed in Akidah Akhlāq to the memorization and thematic categorization required in *Hadīth* studies—demonstrates its versatility and relevance across Islamic Religious Education subjects.

However, the study also identified challenges that require attention. Classroom noise and distractions during group activities occasionally hindered concentration and effective communication. Moreover, preparing the card materials demanded considerable time and effort from educators, which may limit the method's wider adoption without institutional support. These challenges emphasize the importance of strategic classroom management, clear activity guidelines, and adequate teacher training to optimize the method's effectiveness.

Based on these insights, several recommendations are proposed for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers. First, educators should be encouraged and supported to integrate the Card Sort method and other active learning strategies into Islamic Religious Education curricula. Professional development programs focusing on active learning pedagogy, classroom management, and material preparation can empower teachers to implement these methods effectively. Second, curriculum developers should design instructional materials that incorporate card-based activities aligned with learning objectives, ensuring both content appropriateness and cultural relevance. Third, school administrators and policymakers should allocate resources—including time for preparation and collaboration among teachers—and provide supportive classroom environments conducive to active learning.

To address challenges related to classroom noise and preparation time, it is recommended that teachers establish clear behavioral expectations, utilize structured time management, and arrange physical spaces to facilitate focused group work. Leveraging technology to develop digital card sorting tools may also reduce preparation burdens and enhance accessibility. Furthermore, fostering a school culture that values active learning and student-centered approaches will encourage sustained adoption and ongoing innovation.

Conflict of interests

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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