

Experiences of the Elderly in Learning the Qur'an via the Al-Ishlah Method Within the Qur'anic Literacy Program

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ABSTRACT

The ability to read the Al-Qur'an is an essential foundation of Islamic worship; however, Al-Qur'an literacy among elderly individuals remains a significant challenge due to cognitive decline and limited educational opportunities in the past. This study aimed to describe and explore the lived experiences of elderly learners participating in Al-Qur'an learning through the Al-Ishlah method within an Al-Qur'an literacy program. Employing a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, this study involved seven elderly female participants aged 40–62 years at Majelis Taklim Nur Husni Hidayah, Karawang, who were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, analyzed using interactive analysis consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, and validated through triangulation. The findings identified four central themes: (1) strong spiritual motivation driven by eschatological orientation toward preparing for the end of life; (2) physiological and cognitive barriers, including short-term memory decline, visual impairment, and articulation difficulties (makhrāj); (3) the effectiveness of the practical Al-Ishlah method combined with a patient and humanistic muallim approach, which reduced cognitive burden and affective barriers; and (4) holistic self-transformation characterized by increased self-efficacy, inner peace, and strengthened social support networks. This study concludes that the Al-Ishlah method and an adaptive classical learning environment effectively support elderly learners in overcoming age-related learning challenges. Future program improvements should include the implementation of large-print learning materials and the optimization of individualized guidance (talaqqi).

INTRODUCTION

The ability to read the Qur'an is an important aspect of Muslim life, not only as a form of worship but also as a foundation for understanding religious teachings comprehensively. However, the level of Qur'an literacy remains a significant social issue, particularly among elderly individuals. Many elderly people have limited Qur'an reading abilities due to restricted educational opportunities in the past and age-related changes that may affect cognitive function and memory. This condition highlights the importance of systematic literacy programs that address not only children and adolescents but also elderly learners (Al-Baqi, 2007; Al-Munawir, 2010; Azra, 2012; Erikson, 1993; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

Learning approaches for elderly individuals cannot be equated with those applied to children or adolescents. Older learners have distinctive characteristics, including the need for

simpler, repetitive learning processes and a patient, humanistic approach. Therefore, adaptive and effective learning methods are required to ensure that the learning process remains meaningful without creating psychological burdens for learners. One method developed for Qur'an learning is the Al-Ishlah method, which is designed as a structured, practical, and accessible approach to improving Qur'an reading skills across different age groups (Huda, 2017; Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2023; Knowles, 1984; Knowles et al., 2020; Krashen, 1982; Kristanto, 2023).

Previous studies have demonstrated that various Qur'an learning methods, such as the Iqra', Tilawati, and Qiraati methods, have been developed to improve reading abilities. However, most previous research has focused on quantitatively measuring method effectiveness and has primarily involved children and adolescents. Studies specifically examining elderly learners' experiences in Qur'an learning, particularly through the Al-Ishlah method, remain limited. Furthermore, qualitative investigations exploring the meaning of elderly participants' learning experiences are still relatively scarce, despite their importance in understanding the learning process more comprehensively (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Salthouse, 2016; Sweller, 2011; Tremblay et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2018).

Based on this condition, a research gap exists regarding the limited exploration of elderly learners' experiences in Qur'an learning through qualitative approaches, particularly within Qur'an literacy programs using the Al-Ishlah method. Understanding learners' experiences can provide deeper insights into factors that support or hinder the learning process, as well as how learning methods are perceived and interpreted by participants. This gap is increasingly relevant considering the growing elderly population in Indonesia, while religious literacy programs specifically designed to accommodate their learning characteristics remain limited (Bandura, 1997; Zarkasyi, 2022a, 2022b).

The novelty of this study lies in its phenomenological approach to exploring the lived experiences of elderly learners participating in Qur'an literacy programs, an area that has received limited qualitative attention. Unlike previous studies that primarily evaluated learning effectiveness through quantitative measures among children and adolescents, this study examines the subjective meanings, challenges, and personal transformations experienced by elderly participants. By integrating principles of andragogy, Islamic educational methods, and the psychological needs of older adults, this study provides a broader perspective on adapting religious literacy programs for aging populations.

This study aimed to describe the experiences of elderly learners in studying the Qur'an through the Al-Ishlah method within a Qur'an literacy program. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of Islamic education studies, particularly regarding Qur'an learning among elderly individuals, and practically to the design of more effective, humanistic, and adaptive learning strategies that address the characteristics of elderly learners.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. This approach was selected to explore the experiences of elderly learners participating in Qur'an learning through the Al-Ishlah method within a Qur'an literacy program. The

phenomenological approach was used to examine the meaning of participants' subjective experiences throughout the learning process.

The research was conducted at Majelis Ta'lim Nur Husni Hidayah, Karawang, involving seven elderly participants who actively participated in Qur'an learning using the Al-Ishlah method. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on the criteria of being elderly learners, actively participating in the learning program, and being willing to provide in-depth information regarding their learning experiences.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the learning process. Observations were conducted to examine the learning activities, interactions between instructors and participants, and classroom dynamics. Documentation was used to support the data through activity records, photographs, and relevant program archives.

Data analysis was conducted interactively through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and organizing information relevant to the research objectives, while data presentation was conducted through systematic descriptive narratives (Moleong, 2018; Sugiyono, 2023b, 2023a; Sweller, 2011; Yusuf, 2017). Conclusions were developed through interpretation of the meanings derived from participants' learning experiences. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, as well as member checking with participants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on thematic analysis of questionnaire data and *in-depth interview* transcripts, participants in this study consisted of 7 elderly women (aged between 40 and 62 years, with the majority over 50 years old) who were actively studying at Majelis Taklim Nur Husni Hidayah, Karawang.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the participants' emic profiles, the demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Elderly Participants

Yes	Participant's Initials	Age (Years)	Gender	Taklim Council	Al-Ishlah Method Learning Experience
1	Hj. O	62	Women	Nur Husni Hidayah	2 Years
2	TR	47	Women	Nur Husni Hidayah	< 1 Year
3	N	40	Women	Nur Husni Hidayah	< 1 Year
4	EM (1)	61	Women	Nur Husni Hidayah	< 1 Year
5	Hj. EM (2)	61	Women	Nur Husni Hidayah	1 Year
6	E	54	Women	Nur Husni Hidayah	< 1 Year
7	AK	56	Women	Nur Husni Hidayah	8 Months

Through the reduction of phenomenological data (*epoche* and *horizontalization*), four central themes were found that represent the *lived experience* of the elderly in the process of achieving Qur'anic literacy, namely: (1) Spiritual Motivation and Eschatological Orientation; (2) Physiological and Cognitive Barriers in the Learning Process; (3) Characteristics of the Effectiveness of the Al-Ishlah Method and the Central Role of Muallim; and (4) Psychological, Social, and Religiosity Transformation. A summary matrix of phenomenological data reduction results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Thematic Matrix of the Experience of the Elderly in the Al-Ishlah Method

Main Thema	Sub-Theme	Unit of Meaning (Participant Key Statement)
1. Spiritual Motivation & Eschatological Orientation	Improving the quality of worship	"I want to read the Qur'an more fluently according to the tajweed." (Hj. EM)
	End-of-life anxiety	"Shame if you die and cannot read the Qur'an, you are sure that the Qur'an intercedes in the hereafter." (E)
2. Physiological & Cognitive Barriers	Decreased memory	"Memory because I often forget the material, often confuse the pronunciation of letters." (TR)
	Physical (visionary) impairment	"Sometimes forgetfulness and vision begin to diminish." (E)
3. Effectiveness of Methods & Roles of Muallim	Articulation complexity	"In pronouncing bold letters is a bit difficult, the layout of the voice in the mouth." (N, EM)
	Classical learning	"I like to be in a group, happy because I have friends who study together." (E)
	Teacher patience	"The assistance of the ustadzah who is patient in guiding makes it comfortable." (Hj. O, N, AK)
4. Self-Transformation (Psychological & Religious)	Positive affection (calm)	"Happy, grateful to be able to take the time to study the Qur'an." (E)
	Increased self-efficacy	"I am more confident because I have started to know tajweed and makhroj." (Hj. O, AK)

Theme 1: Spiritual Motivation and Eschatological Orientation

The life experience of the elderly begins with an internal impulse that is transcendental. The elderly are aware of the limitations of their remaining life, thus triggering a strong desire to improve their interaction with the scriptures. This motivation is not just the fulfillment of the cognitive aspect, but part of spiritual preparation to face the final phase of life (eschatology).

Participant E (54 years old) revealed his existential anxiety:

"I feel ashamed that if I die, I can't read the Qur'an... I am sure that the Qur'an will intercede for me in the hereafter. That's why I want to use the time for something useful."

Meanwhile, Hj. EM (61 years old) emphasized the importance of accuracy in worship:

"My motivation is to read the Qur'an better and correctly in accordance with the rules of tajweed."

Theme 2: Physiological and Cognitive Barriers in the Learning Process

As late adult *learners*, the elderly face natural biological setbacks that affect their learning speed. The main obstacles that are felt are centered on *short-term memory decay*, sensory limitations, and motor-articulation constraints (speech/makhroj).

Hj. O (62 years old) said:

"The most perceived obstacle is memory because we often forget the tajweed material."

The same thing was said by TR (47 years old):

"Forget the tajweed material, often knock on the pronunciation of hijaiyah letters."

In addition to the cognitive aspect, a decrease in the function of the organs of vision (*presbyopia*) became a real physical obstacle for participant E:

"Sometimes forgetfulness and vision begins to diminish [when reciting the mushaf]."

Linguistically technically, the transition from the phonological structure of the mother tongue to the Arabic phoneme also triggered significant initial difficulties, such as those experienced by N (40 years old) and EM (61 years old):

"Learning makhrojul letters is difficult to arrange the sound in his mouth, especially in pronouncing thick letters."

Theme 3: Characteristics of the Effectiveness of the Al-Ishlah Method and the Central Role of Muallim

Despite being faced with physical and cognitive limitations, the application of the Al-Ishlah method is considered to provide convenience for the elderly. The classical (grouped) learning structure fosters an inclusive and non-intimidating academic climate. The determinants of learning comfort are identified as originating from an adaptive and supportive approach to muallim (teachers).

Participant AK (56 years old) shared his experience:

"First, I participated in the learning and I felt nervous and afraid that I couldn't. But the more I enjoy it, the more fun it becomes. The method of Al-Ishlah is relatively classically easy to understand."

The non-judgmental nature of teaching is the key to the resilience of the elderly, as expressed by N:

"The teacher is very patient in guiding, the ustadzah is patient in dealing with the mothers, so the learning process makes us comfortable."

Theme 4: Psychological, Social, and Religiosity Transformation

The final experience of this phenomenon is the existence of a deep emotional and social reconstruction in the elderly. The success of spelling and reciting the letters of the Qur'an correctly gives birth to feelings of empowerment, increases *self-efficacy*, and expands social support among fellow elderly.

Participant Hj. O recounted the growth of confidence:

"Alhamdulillah, the ability is better now, although there are still many that have not been mastered. I feel more confident because I have started to know tajweed."

Emotionally, the program turns old age leisure into a happy cognitive activity, as summarized by E:

"I am very happy and grateful to have friends who are both struggling to learn the Qur'an at this age. Fill your free time with new knowledge."

The phenomenological approach in this study succeeded in exploring the psychological and sociological reality of the elderly in the Qur'an literacy program using the Al-Ishlah method. The structure of the elderly experience moves from spiritual meaning, the struggle against biological deterioration, to the achievement of inner satisfaction in old age. The success of the Al-Ishlah method in the Qur'an literacy program at Majelis Taklim Nur Husni Hidayah is inseparable from the conformity of the characteristics of the method with the principles of adult learning (*andragogi*).

Increased Motivation for Elderly Learning and Eschatological Orientation

The results of the analysis prove that the learning impulse in the elderly is dominated by intrinsic-spiritual motivation. Eschatological orientation (such as the fear of dying before being able to read the Qur'an correctly and the search for intercession in the hereafter) became the main fuel that maintained the consistency of their presence. Judging from Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the elderly are at the stage *of integrity versus despair* (Ego Integrity vs Despair). Elderly people who actively fill their old age by getting closer to transcendental religious values are trying to achieve inner stability and self-integrity in order to ward off *death anxiety* (Erikson, 1993; Wong et al., 2018). This phenomenon of high enthusiasm proves that religious programs have very high practical relevance for the fulfillment of adult learners' spiritual development tasks (Knowles et al., 2020).

The Structural Ease of the Al-Ishlah Method in Overcoming Cognitive Barriers

Neuropsychologically, the aging process has a linear decline in information processing *speed* and *working memory impairment* (Salthouse, 2016). This limitation manifests itself in the complaints of "often forgetting the material" and "difficulty reciting the makhraj in bold letters" experienced by the participants. The decline in the elasticity of *speech motor control* in old age causes the articulation of new phonemes to require much greater cognitive effort (Tremblay et al., 2019).

This is where the Al-Ishlah method comes in as an effective mitigation instrument. The design of the Al-Ishlah method that is practical, systematic, and presented without a convoluted tiering system has been proven to minimize the *cognitive overload* of elderly participants. Because the material is presented gradually and repeatedly, the elderly can internalize the rules of tajweed without feeling burdened by the complicated theoretical structure of the Arabic language. This is in line with the principle of adaptive learning, where instructional effectiveness is maximized when *the extraneous cognitive load* is suppressed as low as possible to match the learner's working memory capacity (Sweller, 2011).

Growing Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy in Old Age

One of the fundamental achievements revealed from the participants' lived experience is the reconstruction of self-confidence. Before entering the program, the elderly are often surrounded by feelings of doubt, shame, and inferiority due to their limited religious literacy. The success of reciting makhraj correctly through directed guidance fosters a *sense of mastery*. Based on Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, *enactive mastery experiences* are the strongest source in constructing one's *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1997). When confidence

increases, the academic anxiety of the elderly will shrink, so that they dare to read the Qur'an in public spaces without being overshadowed by the fear of being wrong.

The Role of Classical Learning Environment Policy and Supportive Approaches to Muallim

The interview data shows how central the social atmosphere is in encouraging learning success. The selection of classical (group) learning strategies is preferred by the elderly because it provides a space for warm intergenerational social interaction. *Majlis taklim* functions as a social support *network* provider that is able to reduce social isolation in old age. Based on epidemiological research, high *social connectedness* is positively correlated with a reduced risk of depression and increased *life satisfaction* in the elderly group (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the characteristics of patient, humane, and non-comparative muallim (not comparing the abilities between participants) are the key to the retention of the elderly in this program. In the perspective of language learning psychology, the attitude of teachers who are full of acceptance and empathy succeed in lowering *the affective filter* (emotional fortress) of the elderly (Krashen, 1982). When emotional anxiety is at its lowest, motivation and comfort are at its highest, so the teaching and learning process turns into a happy and meaningful old ageing experience.

Future Program Challenges and Recommendations

Although the Al-Ishlah method is considered very applicable, this phenomenological research detects technical limitations in the field. Factors of decreased physical sensory function, such as reduced visual acuity (*presbyopia*), have implications for the elderly in reading the size of mushaf letters or guidebooks that are too small. In addition, time constraints due to the domestic busyness of the muallim often make the intensity of the meeting less consistent.

As a step to improve the program in the future, it is suggested that there be a modification of teaching media in the form of the procurement of Al-Ishlah modules with *large-print media* that is elderly-friendly. In addition, the frequency of individual guidance through *talaqqi* (face-to-face) needs to be intensified in order to provide a space for more personal and in-depth correction of the makhraj, without neglecting the communal psychological comfort that has been formed in the classical class.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study revealed that the lived experiences of elderly learners participating in a Qur'an literacy program through the Al-Ishlah method at *Majlis Ta'lim Nur Husni Hidayah*, Karawang, were characterized by a dynamic interaction between strong spiritual motivation and challenges related to physical and cognitive changes associated with aging. The essence of this phenomenon indicates that elderly learners' motivation was not primarily oriented toward academic achievement but was driven by eschatological awareness to improve the quality of religious practices as part of spiritual preparation for the later stages of life. Although the aging process presented challenges, including short-term memory decline, reduced visual ability, and speech articulation difficulties (makhraj), the participants demonstrated sustained motivation and resilience throughout the learning process.

The factors that supported the elderly learners in overcoming these challenges were related to the structural characteristics of the Al-Ishlah method and the supportive learning environment. The Al-Ishlah method, which was practical, gradual, and easy to follow, helped reduce cognitive burden among elderly learners. The classical and group-based learning format also transformed the majlis ta'lim environment into a source of social support, reducing individual anxiety and feelings of inadequacy during the learning process. Furthermore, the patient, humane, and accepting approach of the muallim served as an important emotional support factor, allowing elderly learners to feel valued and comfortable throughout their learning experience.

The interaction between these factors contributed to holistic transformation among elderly learners. The ability to improve Qur'an reading skills strengthened their sense of achievement and enhanced self-efficacy in later life. Psychologically, participation in the program also contributed to increased life satisfaction and inner peace among the elderly participants. As practical implications for future religious literacy programs, more age-friendly learning adaptations are recommended, including the use of large-print learning materials and increased individualized guidance (talaqqi) to improve makhraj accuracy while maintaining the supportive communal atmosphere. These findings indicate that Qur'an literacy education for elderly learners is not merely a process of transferring linguistic knowledge but also serves as a psychosocial and spiritual intervention that may contribute to improving the subjective well-being of older adults.

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