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Teaching *ilmu kalam* in madrasah aliyah: a qualitative study of perceived learning difficulties and instructional responses

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Abstract: Teaching *ilmu kalam* (Islamic scholastic theology) at the madrasah aliyah level presents pedagogical challenges because of its abstract theological concepts, specialized terminology, and complex doctrinal traditions. This study explores an *akidah akhlak* teacher's perceptions of teaching *ilmu kalam*, with particular attention to the characteristics of the subject matter, perceived student difficulties, instructional adaptations, and the appropriateness of its curricular placement. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the study collected data through a semi-structured interview with one Grade XI teacher and analyzed them thematically. The findings indicate that, although students generally appeared to understand fundamental concepts, many reportedly struggled to articulate theological positions independently. In response, the teacher employed simplified explanations, conceptual scaffolding, probing questions, and classroom discussions to facilitate comprehension. The teacher also considered *ilmu kalam* appropriate for Grade XI or XII, given the conceptual demands of the subject. This study highlights how teachers interpret disciplinary complexity and adapt instruction to perceived learner needs. Its practical implication is that the teaching of abstract theological content may benefit from scaffolded explanations and dialogic learning strategies. However, the findings reflect a single teacher's perspective and do not establish students' actual learning outcomes or the effectiveness of particular instructional strategies. The study offers an original, context-specific account of pedagogical adaptation in Islamic theological education.

Keywords: *Ilmu kalam*, Islamic religious education, madrasah aliyah, learning problems, instructional strategies

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Introduction

Islamic religious education extends beyond the transmission of foundational doctrines; it also seeks to develop students' capacity to understand, interpret, and critically engage with complex religious knowledge. This educational responsibility becomes particularly demanding when students encounter abstract theological concepts that involve interconnected arguments, specialized terminology, and historically situated intellectual traditions. From a cognitive perspective, learning such content requires learners to process multiple interacting elements while drawing on their existing knowledge structures. Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) explains that working memory has limited processing capacity and that instructional design plays a decisive role in determining how effectively learners process complex information (Sweller et al., 2019). Recent developments in cognitive load research further emphasize that perceived task complexity is shaped not only by the amount of information presented but also by the interactivity among information elements and learners' prior knowledge (Chen et al., 2023; Hanham et al., 2023). Accordingly, the complexity of theological learning should be understood in relation to both the epistemological characteristics of the subject matter and students' preparedness to engage with

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it. Learners' differing levels of prior knowledge and religious familiarity may further influence how they interpret and assimilate new theological concepts (Endres et al., 2023).

At the madrasah aliyah level, *ilmu kalam* constitutes an important component of Islamic theological education because it introduces students to the historical development of Islamic doctrines, theological debates, and diverse schools of thought. Its subject matter encompasses theological traditions such as the Khawarij, Shia, Murji'ah, Jabariyah, Qadariyah, Mu'tazilah, and Ahlusunah Waljamaah (Qusairi, Fuady, & Nor, 2026). Understanding these traditions requires more than memorizing names, definitions, or doctrinal classifications. Students are expected to recognize differences in theological assumptions, understand the arguments underlying particular positions, and establish conceptual relationships among competing interpretations. These demands can make the subject challenging, particularly when students have limited familiarity with theological terminology or insufficient conceptual foundations. Research on task complexity suggests that learning becomes more demanding when several interacting elements must be processed simultaneously, especially when learners have not yet developed sufficiently organized knowledge structures (Chen et al., 2023; Skulmowski & Xu, 2022; Sukenti et al., 2025; Rusdiana, Basir, & Fuady, 2024). Thus, teaching *ilmu kalam* requires instructional approaches that make conceptual relationships explicit and help students progressively construct an understanding of complex theological material.

Recent scholarship in religious education has increasingly emphasized the importance of subject-specific pedagogy, meaningful engagement with religious knowledge, and instructional approaches that support students' interpretation of complex religious content. Research on religious education indicates that students' engagement with religious sources depends partly on their ability to interpret texts, recognize different interpretive positions, and understand the intellectual contexts in which religious ideas emerge (Bowie et al., 2022; Lewin et al., 2023). Similarly, Aseery (2024) highlights the contribution of manageable learning activities, positive feedback, and varied instructional strategies to students' motivation and engagement in religious education. These perspectives suggest that effective religious instruction should not be restricted to the delivery of doctrinal information; rather, it should provide opportunities for students to examine concepts, articulate their understanding, and engage with different perspectives through appropriately structured learning experiences.

Within the Indonesian context, emerging studies have begun to address the instructional challenges associated specifically with *ilmu kalam*. Imron et al. (2025), for example, examined the use of instructional media in Grade XI at madrasah aliyah Nujumul Huda Batu Samban and described the integration of visual, audio, and audiovisual resources in teaching theological material. More recently, Putri et al. (2025) investigated students' learning difficulties in understanding the schools of Islamic theology and the strategies used by teachers to address them. These studies provide valuable contextual insights into instructional media and students' reported learning difficulties. Nevertheless, further qualitative investigation is needed to understand how teachers themselves interpret the relationship between the conceptual characteristics of *ilmu kalam*, students' perceived comprehension difficulties, and the pedagogical decisions made in response to those difficulties. In particular, the ways in which teachers simplify theological terminology, organize conceptual explanations, use questioning and discussion, and judge the developmental appropriateness of the subject remain important areas for contextualized inquiry.

This study addresses this gap by exploring an *akidah akhlak* teacher's perceptions and pedagogical experiences in teaching *ilmu kalam* at the madrasah aliyah level. Drawing on a qualitative descriptive approach, it examines how the teacher understands the characteristics of the subject matter, identifies students' reported comprehension difficulties, and describes the instructional responses employed to support learning (Fuady & Mukaddam, 2024). It also investigates the teacher's perceptions of the appropriateness of introducing *ilmu kalam* at. The study is informed by the broader perspective of pedagogical content knowledge, particularly the understanding that teaching requires educators to transform disciplinary knowledge into explanations and learning experiences that are accessible to particular learners. Its contribution lies in providing a context-specific, teacher-centered account of how the conceptual demands of Islamic theology are interpreted and addressed in classroom instruction. Importantly, the study

does not seek to measure students' actual learning achievements or establish the causal effectiveness of particular teaching strategies. Instead, it offers an interpretive account of teachers' pedagogical reasoning that may inform subsequent classroom-based and student-centered investigations.

Accordingly, this study is guided by three research questions: (1) What characteristics of *ilmu kalam* material does the teacher perceive as contributing to learning difficulty? (2) What forms of students' comprehension difficulty does the teacher report? (3) What instructional responses does the teacher describe using, and how does the teacher perceive the developmental suitability of *ilmu kalam* for madrasah aliyah students?

Literature Review

Conceptual characteristics of *ilmu kalam* in islamic secondary education

The study of *ilmu kalam* (Islamic scholastic theology) occupies a foundational position within Islamic religious education, tasked with examining creedal doctrines through a synthesis of scriptural texts and rational argumentation. Within the madrasah aliyah curriculum, this domain extends beyond the memorization of creedal dogmas; it requires students to navigate the historical emergence, structural taxonomy, and doctrinal divergences of major theological schools including the Khawarij, Shia, Murji'ah, Jabariyah, Qadariyah, Mu'tazilah, and the mainstream Ash'ariyah and Maturidiyah traditions (Rosalia et al., 2026; Fuady, & Sofianto, 2024).

Recent scholarship in Islamic theological pedagogy emphasizes that conceptual learning in theology demands high order cognitive integration rather than inert knowledge acquisition. Unlike subjects driven by procedural algorithms, *ilmu kalam* requires learners to map intersecting historical trajectories, reconcile theological propositions, and differentiate subtle nuances among competing epistemological frameworks. Consequently, learning difficulties frequently arise not from a lack of student capability, but from the dense, abstract web of terminology and historical contexts characteristic of theological texts. Addressing these conceptual demands necessitates robust pedagogical frameworks that bridge abstract scholastic traditions with the developmental readiness of secondary-level students.

Cognitive load and instructional demands in abstract theological learning

To systematically analyze the cognitive friction inherent in learning abstract religious concepts, educational research frequently draws upon Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller et al., 2019). The theory posits that working memory possesses a strictly limited capacity when processing novel information containing multiple interacting elements. When applied to theological education where students must simultaneously process unfamiliar terminology, historical timelines, and sectarian distinctions unmanaged instructional complexity can easily induce cognitive overload.

However, applying a general psychological framework like cognitive load theory to Islamic religious education requires careful epistemological contextualization. General cognitive models primarily originate from empirical findings in STEM disciplines, where problem-solving structures are mathematically or logically bounded. In contrast, theological reasoning involves faith-based frameworks, philosophical abstraction, and historical interpretation (Tambak et al., 2022). Therefore, cognitive load theory serves in this context strictly as an interpretive lens to understand why dense lexical and doctrinal taxonomies present learning hurdles, rather than as an exact metric of mental processing. To mitigate these processing bottlenecks, pedagogical literature highlights the necessity of instructional scaffolding such as linguistic simplification, progressive concept sequencing, and interactive discourse which allows educators to manage working memory limitations while preserving the intellectual rigor of religious texts.

Student understanding, conceptual articulation, and pedagogical mediation

Within educational psychology and pedagogical research, true conceptual understanding transcends rote recall it is demonstrated through a learner's capacity to internalize, organize, and articulate concepts in their own terms. Contemporary studies on conceptual learning emphasize that self-explanation and structured academic discourse serve as vital mechanisms for knowledge

construction, enabling learners to bridge foundational definitions with complex doctrinal principles (Gao et al., 2025; Sukenti & Tambak, 2026).

In the specific realm of Islamic education, the transition from recognizing basic theological terms to independently explaining complex inter school doctrines marks a critical milestone in cognitive development. When students struggle to articulate theological distinctions, it reflects the inherent complexity of organizing abstract religious knowledge rather than an inherent failure of student aptitude or curriculum suitability. Effective instructional mediation such as probing questions, collaborative peer discussions, and targeted teacher scaffolding plays a decisive role in guiding students through this cognitive transition. By synthesizing these dimensions, the literature underscores a continuous interplay among material complexity, students' prior religious background, and adaptive instructional strategies in shaping conceptual mastery within Islamic secondary education.

Method

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to examine a teacher's perceptions and pedagogical experiences of teaching *ilmu kalam* at the madrasah aliyah level. A qualitative descriptive approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to produce a contextually grounded account of the participant's professional perspectives and instructional practices without developing a formal theory or claiming to capture the lived essence of a broader phenomenon. This design enables researchers to remain close to participants' accounts while systematically describing the characteristics, meanings, and contextual features of the issue under investigation (Villamin et al., 2025).

The inquiry focused on four interrelated dimensions: (1) the characteristics and perceived complexity of *ilmu kalam* content, (2) students' comprehension difficulties as reported by the teacher, (3) the instructional strategies described by the teacher, and (4) the teacher's professional judgment regarding the suitability of the subject matter for madrasah aliyah students. The study was deliberately limited to the teacher's perspective. It did not seek to measure student achievement, evaluate instructional effectiveness, or establish the objective appropriateness of the curriculum.

Research informant and selection

The informant was one *akidah akhlak* teacher at a madrasah aliyah who was directly responsible for teaching *ilmu kalam*. The participant was selected purposively because of the relevance of their professional experience to the research questions. Specifically, the teacher's direct involvement in delivering the subject provided an appropriate source of information about its perceived conceptual demands, classroom-related challenges, and instructional responses. The selection was based on the criterion of direct teaching responsibility rather than statistical representativeness. Accordingly, the participant was treated as a key informant whose account could provide context-specific insight into the instructional phenomenon. The study does not claim that this single account represents the experiences of all *akidah akhlak* teachers or all madrasah aliyah contexts. The limited number of informants is therefore acknowledged as a boundary of the study rather than interpreted as evidence of data saturation.

Data collection

Data were collected exclusively through a semi-structured interview with the selected teacher. This technique was chosen because it provides a consistent structure for addressing predetermined research topics while allowing the interviewer to use follow-up questions and prompts to clarify the participant's explanations and professional reasoning. Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful for exploring context-dependent professional perspectives because they combine thematic direction with conversational flexibility (Buys et al., 2022). The interview guide was organized around four areas corresponding to the research questions: (1) the characteristics of *ilmu kalam* content and the aspects perceived as difficult to teach; (2) the forms of student comprehension difficulties observed or reported by the teacher; (3) the instructional strategies used to facilitate students' understanding; and (4) the teacher's

assessment of the appropriateness of introducing *ilmu kalam* at the madrasah aliyah level, particularly in Grade XI or XII. Open-ended questions were used to encourage the informant to explain experiences and provide contextual examples.

The interview was the sole source of empirical data. No classroom observations, student interviews, learning assessments, or curriculum document analyses were conducted. Consequently, statements concerning students' understanding and learning difficulties are presented as teacher-reported perceptions, not as independently verified evidence of student performance. Likewise, the teacher's judgment about curricular suitability is interpreted as an expression of professional opinion rather than an objective curriculum evaluation.

Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using a structured descriptive coding process. The analysis aimed to organize the informant's account systematically while maintaining close alignment between the original statements, the research questions, and the interpretations presented. Consistent with the purpose of qualitative descriptive research, the analysis prioritized a transparent, data-near representation of the participant's account rather than an abstract theoretical interpretation (Villamin et al., 2025). The analytical process involved four interconnected steps. *First*, the interview material was reviewed to identify statements relevant to the research objectives. *Second*, relevant statements were assigned descriptive codes reflecting their substantive content. *Third*, conceptually related codes were grouped into four predetermined analytical categories: (1) characteristics and perceived difficulty of *ilmu kalam* material; (2) teacher-reported student comprehension difficulties; (3) instructional strategies described by the teacher; and (4) the teacher's professional judgment concerning material suitability. *Fourth*, the categorized information was interpreted descriptively to identify the principal issues, relationships, and instructional considerations expressed in the interview.

Throughout this process, the analysis distinguished between the informant's statements and the researcher's interpretations. Claims about students' comprehension were not treated as direct student evidence, while descriptions of instructional strategies were not interpreted as proof of their effectiveness. This distinction was maintained to ensure that the findings remained proportionate to the available data.

Research rigor and reflexivity

Methodological rigor was addressed through transparent reporting of the research design, informant selection, data source, analytical focus, and limitations. The analytical categories were explicitly aligned with the research questions, and interpretations were kept close to the interview account. The researcher also maintained a distinction between participant-reported information and researcher-generated interpretation to reduce the risk of presenting assumptions as empirical findings. Reflexivity was particularly important because the study relied on one informant and one data collection method. The researcher therefore needed to remain attentive to how prior assumptions about Islamic theological education and classroom instruction might influence the interpretation of the teacher's account. Reflexive awareness is an important consideration in qualitative interviewing and the interpretation of professional perspectives (Buys et al., 2022). More broadly, qualitative research rigor requires transparent and context-sensitive consideration of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024; Singh et al., 2021).

However, the study did not employ methodological triangulation because no additional data sources or collection methods were used. It also did not claim member checking, independent coding, or external audit unless these procedures were actually undertaken. Transferability is therefore supported primarily through a clear description of the research context, informant characteristics, and scope of inquiry, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to comparable educational settings.

Ethical considerations

The study involved an adult teacher as its sole informant. Participation should have been based on informed and voluntary consent, with appropriate measures to protect the participant's

identity and the confidentiality of the interview data. The manuscript should report the relevant institutional ethical approval or exemption, including the name of the approving institution and reference number, where applicable. If formal ethical approval was not obtained, this should be disclosed accurately in accordance with the journal's requirements. No ethical approval number or consent procedure is assumed in this account.

Results

The findings of this study were obtained through an interview with a *akidah akhlak* teacher at a madrasah aliyah who teaches *ilmu kalam* material. The interview was conducted to obtain information regarding the difficulties encountered during the learning process, the forms of difficulties experienced by students, the strategies used by the teacher to address these difficulties, and the teacher's view of the suitability of *ilmu kalam* material for madrasah aliyah students. Based on the interview, the findings were organized into four main aspects: (1) the characteristics and level of difficulty of *ilmu kalam* material, (2) the forms of students' difficulties in understanding the material, (3) the teacher's strategies for addressing learning difficulties, and (4) the suitability of *ilmu kalam* material for the madrasah aliyah level.

Table 1. Summary of findings on *ilmu kalam* learning problems

No	Aspect	Main Findings	Teacher's Response / Condition
1	Characteristics and level of difficulty of the material	Characteristics and level of difficulty of the material	Characteristics and level of difficulty of the material
2	Students' comprehension difficulties	Students' comprehension difficulties	Students' comprehension difficulties
3	Teacher's instructional strategies	Teacher's instructional strategies	Teacher's instructional strategies
4	Suitability of the material for madrasah aliyah	Despite its relatively high level of difficulty, *ilmu kalam* is considered appropriate for Grade XI or XII madrasah aliyah students.	The material is retained, while instructional strategies are adapted to students' understanding.

Table 1 summarizes the main findings obtained from the teacher interview. The findings show that the problems in *ilmu kalam* learning are mainly related to the complexity of the material and differences in students' understanding. At the same time, the teacher does not consider the material unsuitable for madrasah aliyah students. The teacher's response is directed toward adapting the learning process through various instructional strategies.

Characteristics of *ilmu kalam* material and its level of difficulty

The interview findings indicate that *ilmu kalam* material was perceived by the teacher as relatively more difficult than several other *akidah akhlak* materials taught to students. The teacher specifically stated that the material was "it's a bit difficult compared to other material," indicating that *ilmu kalam* was considered to have a higher level of difficulty in comparison with other topics within the subject. According to the teacher, one of the main characteristics contributing to the difficulty of *ilmu kalam* was the large number of terms contained in the material. Students were required to encounter and understand various terms related to Islamic theological thought. In addition to terminology, the material also included a number of concepts that students needed to understand. These concepts were related to different theological perspectives and schools of thought. The teacher also identified the number of schools of thought as another aspect that contributed to the difficulty of the material. Students were introduced to several schools within

the history of *ilmu kalam*, each with its own characteristics and theological positions. Therefore, the material required students to deal with information concerning different schools and the ideas associated with them.

Although the material was considered relatively difficult, the teacher did not consider this difficulty to be a reason for removing or replacing *ilmu kalam* from the learning material at the madrasah aliyah level. When asked about the suitability of the material, the teacher stated that *ilmu kalam* was appropriate for students in Grade XI or XII. Thus, the teacher continued to teach the material while making adjustments to the way it was delivered.

Forms of students' difficulties in understanding *ilmu kalam* material

The interview findings show that students' understanding of *ilmu kalam* was not entirely uniform. The teacher reported that most students had understood the basic concepts of the material. However, some students were still found to have difficulties in understanding *ilmu kalam* material. The teacher's description of students' difficulties became particularly evident when students were asked to explain the material again. Some students were still unable to explain the material they had learned independently after receiving the teacher's explanation. Thus, the difficulty was not necessarily observed only when the teacher was presenting the material but also when students were asked to communicate their understanding after the explanation had been given.

The ability to explain the material again represented an important point in the teacher's observation of students' understanding. Some students were able to understand the basic concepts, whereas others still needed additional explanation when they were asked to explain the material again. The findings therefore indicate that the level of students' understanding varied. Most students were reported to have understood the basic concepts of *ilmu kalam*, while some students still experienced difficulties, particularly when they were required to explain the material again. This condition became one of the main learning problems identified in the study.

Teacher strategies for addressing difficulties in *ilmu kalam* learning

The interview findings indicate that the teacher employed several strategies to help students understand *ilmu kalam* material. The first strategy was the use of simple language when explaining the material. The teacher attempted to present difficult concepts and terms in language that was easier for students to understand. The teacher also explained several basic components of *ilmu kalam* before moving toward more detailed discussions. The explanation included the meaning of *ilmu kalam*, its function, and its background. By providing an explanation of these basic elements, the teacher attempted to establish an initial understanding before students were introduced to more specific concepts and schools of thought.

Another strategy used by the teacher was the use of prompting questions. The teacher stated that students were encouraged to think through questions related to the material being studied. These questions provided students with opportunities to respond to the material rather than only listening to the teacher's explanation. In addition to explanations and prompting questions, the teacher also used group discussions. Students were given opportunities to discuss the material with other students after receiving explanations of the basic concepts. Question-and-answer activities were also used as part of the learning process, allowing students to ask about concepts that they did not understand and receive clarification from the teacher. The combination of these strategies shows that the teacher used several approaches to present *ilmu kalam* material. The learning process involved direct explanation, simpler language, prompting questions, group discussions, and question-and-answer activities. The findings also indicate that the teacher's response to the difficulty of *ilmu kalam* material was focused on the learning process rather than on changing the material itself. The teacher did not propose replacing the material because of its complexity. Instead, the teacher adjusted the way the material was explained and provided students with opportunities to think, discuss, ask questions, and receive further clarification.

Suitability of *ilmu kalam* material for the madrasah aliyah level

The interview findings show that the teacher considered *ilmu kalam* material appropriate for students at the madrasah aliyah level, particularly for Grade XI or XII. This assessment

remained the same even though the teacher acknowledged that the material was relatively more difficult than other *akidah akhlak* topics. The teacher's view indicates that the existence of difficulties during the learning process was not interpreted as evidence that *ilmu kalam* was unsuitable for madrasah aliyah students. Instead, the material was considered to remain appropriate for the level. The teacher therefore continued to teach *ilmu kalam* and attempted to address the difficulties through adjustments in the instructional process. The suitability of the material was also reflected in the teacher's decision not to suggest that *ilmu kalam* be replaced with other material. The material was retained as part of the learning content, while the teacher adjusted the manner in which it was presented. These adjustments included explaining concepts using simpler language, introducing basic concepts before discussing more detailed material, asking prompting questions, conducting group discussions, and providing question-and-answer opportunities.

The findings indicate that the teacher distinguished between the difficulty of the material and its suitability for students. *Ilmu kalam* was acknowledged as relatively difficult, particularly because of the number of terms, concepts, and schools of thought involved. Nevertheless, this difficulty did not lead the teacher to conclude that the material was inappropriate for Grade XI or XII students. Overall, the findings show that the main problems identified in *ilmu kalam* learning were associated with the relatively complex characteristics of the material and variations in students' understanding. Most students were reported to have understood the basic concepts, while some still experienced difficulties when explaining the material again. The teacher responded to these conditions through simple explanations, basic concept presentation, prompting questions, group discussions, and question-and-answer activities. At the same time, the teacher continued to consider *ilmu kalam* material appropriate for madrasah aliyah students.

Discussion

Navigating conceptual complexity: from terminology to theological reasoning

The informant's perception that *ilmu kalam* is more demanding than other *akidah akhlak* topics aligns with (Putri et al. 2025; Tambak et al., 2020), who noted similar challenges among madrasah aliyah students when studying theological schools. However, from an Islamic Religious Education perspective, this difficulty stems not merely from lexical density, but from the epistemological nature of *ilmu kalam* itself. Unlike subjects focused on ritual practice *fiqh* or moral narratives, *ilmu kalam* requires students to engage with rational argumentation, historical polemics, and abstract metaphysical propositions.

Consequently, the teacher's observation that most students grasped basic definitions yet struggled to explain concepts in their own words highlights a critical pedagogical threshold. In cognitive psychology, this gap reflects the difference between passive recognition and active knowledge construction through self-explanation (Bisra et al., 2018; Tan et al., 2025; Sukenti et al., 2022; Tambak, 2026; Fuady et al., 2024). Within theological education, however, this transition is uniquely demanding: students must move beyond memorizing sectarian labels (e.g., Jabariyah or Qadariyah) to articulating the underlying rational assumptions and scriptural interpretations that define each school. When students fail to re-explain these positions, it suggests they have not yet integrated the logical frameworks connecting historical context with doctrinal claims. Furthermore, as (Gao et al. 2025) note, the efficacy of student-generated explanations depends heavily on prior knowledge. In *ilmu kalam* classrooms, students likely experience uneven cognitive demands due to varying familiarity with Arabic-derived terminology, reading comprehension, and prior religious exposure. Because this study did not directly measure student backgrounds, these factors serve as plausible interpretive explanations and crucial directions for future empirical research.

Pedagogical mediation without doctrinal distortion

To address these reported comprehension barriers, the teacher relied on linguistic simplification, foundational scaffolding, probing questions, and group discussions. While these strategies align with general instructional principles such as managing working memory based on learner readiness (Kalyuga, 2014; Sukenti, Agustina & Fauzan, 2024), fostering inquiry through

questioning (Chin & Osborne, 2008), and promoting peer clarification (Gillies, 2016) their application in *ilmu kalam* carries a distinct theological responsibility.

In Islamic theology, pedagogical mediation requires a delicate balance: teachers must simplify abstract concepts into accessible language without distorting the intellectual and doctrinal substance of the material. Oversimplifying complex debates such as the relationship between human free will and divine decree risks reducing sophisticated theological traditions into rigid, misleading caricatures. The teacher's use of prompting questions and structured discussions, therefore, functions as more than generic active learning (Hattie, 2009); when properly guided, it provides a dialogic space where students can test their interpretations and receive immediate correction before misconceptions about Islamic creed solidify.

Beyond linguistic simplification and foundational scaffolding, the effectiveness of teaching *ilmu kalam* also depends on the teacher's ability to create a structured dialogic environment in which students can articulate, examine, and revise their theological understanding. Recent research demonstrates that productive classroom dialogue is closely associated with the quality of teacher questioning, particularly questions that invite students to explain their reasoning, consider alternative interpretations, and develop more elaborated responses rather than merely recall factual information (Vrikki & Evagorou, 2023; Tao & Chen, 2023; Tambak, 2026; Bahri et al., 2022; Fuady, 2023). From a cognitive perspective, scaffolding through verbal cues, the organization of complex information, and connections with prior knowledge can help learners manage demanding conceptual material without unnecessarily increasing cognitive load (van Nooijen et al., 2024; Endres et al., 2023; Tambak et al., 2025). Applied to *ilmu kalam*, these principles suggest that teachers should organize theological discussions progressively, beginning with students' foundational understanding before introducing more complex debates concerning divine attributes, human freedom, and predestination. Furthermore, dialogic questioning should encourage students to distinguish between theological positions, provide reasons for their interpretations, and listen critically to alternative arguments while maintaining respect for Islamic doctrinal traditions (Miyazaki, 2023; Tao & Chen, 2023; Tambak & Sukenti, 2025). In this respect, the teacher's pedagogical responsibility extends beyond simplifying difficult concepts: it involves constructing a carefully guided intellectual environment in which conceptual accessibility, theological accuracy, and reasoned engagement are maintained simultaneously (Vrikki & Evagorou, 2023; van Nooijen et al., 2024; Barak, 2024).

Responsible representation of theological diversity and curricular suitability

Finally, the informant's judgment that *ilmu kalam* remains appropriate for students reinforces the view that conceptual difficulty should not be mistaken for curricular unsuitability. Within the Merdeka Curriculum, *ilmu kalam* is intentionally positioned to elevate students from basic religious literacy toward analytical competence (Rosalia et al., 2026; Tambak & Sukenti, 2024). Much like "threshold concepts" in religious studies (Mosurinjohn, 2021), mastering *ilmu kalam* requires a transformative shift in how students organize religious knowledge.

Crucially, teaching diverse theological schools ranging from Khawarij and Shia to Mu'tazilah, Ash'ariyah, and Maturidiyah demands responsible representation. Teachers must present doctrinal differences accurately, fairly, and within their historical contexts, rather than framing non-mainstream schools merely as historical errors to be memorized. By retaining the material while adapting instructional delivery, the teacher demonstrated an effort to uphold both curricular rigor and student accessibility (Mutia, Fuady, & Asikinnor, 2026). Ultimately, while this single-informant account cannot establish the empirical effectiveness of these strategies on student achievement, it illustrates how pedagogical adaptation in *ilmu kalam* must simultaneously negotiate cognitive limits and theological integrity.

Furthermore, the pedagogical treatment of *ilmu kalam* should move beyond the transmission of doctrinal classifications toward an epistemologically informed and dialogical engagement with theological knowledge. Students need opportunities to examine how theological positions emerge from particular historical circumstances, interpretive assumptions, and intellectual debates, thereby recognizing that differences among theological traditions involve distinct approaches to fundamental questions about reason, revelation, human agency, and divine

attributes. Recent scholarship on Islamic religious education emphasizes the importance of acknowledging intra-religious plurality and incorporating intercultural and pluralism-oriented perspectives into theological teaching, rather than presenting religious traditions as internally homogeneous (Tuna, 2024; Tambak & Sukenti, 2025; Fuady, 2016). Similarly, research on religious education curriculum argues that access to disciplinary knowledge requires more than memorizing religious facts; it involves developing students' capacity to interpret, critically examine, and contextualize religious concepts through appropriate disciplinary frameworks (Franck, 2021; Tambak & Sukenti, 2026). From this perspective, the teaching of *ilmu kalam* can function as an intellectual space in which students learn to distinguish theological claims, understand the historical development of competing arguments, and engage with disagreement through reasoned interpretation. Such an approach does not require teachers to abandon their theological commitments or treat all positions as doctrinally equivalent; rather, it encourages academically responsible representation, contextual accuracy, and respectful intellectual engagement. Consequently, pedagogical adaptation should preserve the academic substance of ilmu kalam while providing scaffolding that enables students to engage with theological complexity at an appropriate level of conceptual development (Mosurinjohn, 2021; Tuna, 2024; Franck, 2021).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the problems in *ilmu kalam* learning at the madrasah aliyah level are more closely related to the complexity of the material and variations in students' ability to understand and explain the concepts than to the suitability of the material itself for the madrasah aliyah level. The material is considered relatively difficult because it contains numerous terms, concepts, and schools of thought. Nevertheless, the teacher assessed *ilmu kalam* as appropriate for students. Most students were reported to have understood the basic concepts, although some still experienced difficulties when asked to explain the material in their own words. To address these difficulties, the teacher employed simplified language, explanations of basic concepts, prompting questions, group discussions, and question-and-answer activities. These findings indicate that the difficulty of *ilmu kalam* should not be interpreted as a reason to replace the material, but rather as an indication of the need for pedagogical adaptation that enables students to understand complex theological concepts progressively. This finding is also relevant to the implementation of the madrasah curriculum, as Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs No. 1503 of 2025, as an amendment to KMA No. 450 of 2024, provides the policy framework for curriculum implementation at the madrasah aliyah level. Therefore, teachers may retain the substance of *ilmu kalam* material while adapting instructional strategies to students' conditions and learning needs. However, because this study was based on the experience of one teacher, its findings should be understood as a descriptive account of the learning conditions in the particular research context rather than as a general representation of all madrasah aliyah students. Future research could involve more teachers and students from different madrasah aliyah contexts, supported by classroom observations and other data sources, to further examine the effectiveness of instructional strategies in developing students' conceptual understanding of *ilmu kalam*.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

The first author was responsible for developing the research idea, formulating the research objectives, conducting the interview with the *akidah akhlak* teacher as the research informant, collecting the research data, analyzing and interpreting the interview data, and drafting the manuscript. The second author, M. Noor Fuady, contributed as the research supervisor by providing guidance on the research design, reviewing and providing feedback on the analysis and manuscript, and assisting in refining the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for the work.

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manuscript writing, were conducted independently by the authors without any external financial support.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study were obtained through an interview with an *akidah akhlak* teacher at the madrasah aliyah level. The interview data were used to analyze the characteristics and difficulty of *ilmu kalam* material, students' understanding, the teacher's instructional strategies, and the suitability of the material for the madrasah aliyah level. The interview data are not publicly available due to confidentiality considerations regarding the research informant. Relevant information from the interview is presented in the article to support the findings and conclusions of the study.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of use artificial intelligence

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to assist in translating the manuscript into English, improving language quality, refining sentence structure, enhancing academic readability, and organizing the manuscript. The use of AI was limited to supporting the writing and editing process. The research idea, data collection through interviews conducted by the first author, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and formulation of the conclusions remain the academic responsibility of the authors. AI tools did not replace the authors' intellectual contributions or academic judgment. Both authors reviewed the manuscript and take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the article.

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