



An Exploratory Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Studying the Kitab Kuning at Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract

The study of the Kitab Kuning is one of the required subjects that all students at Islamic boarding schools must master, as its content generally relates to all other subjects. However, in reality, there are still students who face challenges in studying the Kitab Kuning, resulting in difficulties in understanding and mastering the material. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the specific difficulties students encounter when studying the Kitab Kuning. This study employed a qualitative method using a case study design. Data were collected through individual and group interviews with two informants, both of whom were students. All informants were selected using purposive sampling. All data were analyzed thematically using the Miles and Huberman interactive technique. The findings reveal three difficulties students face when studying the Kitab Kuning: i) determining sentence rules (qawaid), ii) memorizing vocabulary (mufradat), and iii) memorizing the meanings of vocabulary (mufradat). These findings can serve as valuable information for educators in addressing the three issues mentioned above in the teaching of the Kitab Kuning.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools are educational institutions that teach Islamic ethics and shape students to possess good character, manners, and moral values. In general, Islamic boarding schools instill a sense of independence in students (Ar Rasikh, 2018; Fajrul, 2022; Nurul Romdoni & Malihah, 2020). The success of the educational process is inseparable from the role of teachers and ustadz as educators. Teachers are responsible for designing, implementing, and evaluating the learning process so that educational goals can be optimally achieved. These educational institutions do not focus solely on general studies; rather, Islamic boarding schools place greater emphasis on learning derived from the Quran and Hadith, as well as

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classical texts (kitab kuning). One of the distinctive features of Islamic boarding schools is the study of “kitab kuning” Arabic texts that generally lack vowel marks (harakat), thus requiring linguistic knowledge and skills to understand them (Fauzi & Nabila, 2022; Mustofa, 2019; Rahmatullah et al., 2022).

Every Islamic boarding school that graduates more than 10,000 students per year throughout Indonesia should, at the very least, be able to master one language namely Arabic understand the rules of Arabic grammar (Qawaid Nahwu and Sharf), and excel in the grammatical analysis (i'rab) of Arabic sentences. This is because these Students study at Islamic boarding schools that truly focus on the study of the classical Islamic texts, they receive daily instruction based on classical texts. However, the reality is that there are still some among them who do not understand what they have learned; some are even unable to comprehend or apply it. This indicates that there are factors making it difficult for students in Islamic boarding schools to study the classical texts (Ahsaniyah & Muzayyin, 2025; Anggoro & Miswar, 2025).

Each student has different abilities in absorbing learning material due to factors that cause uneven student abilities, such as learning styles, motivation, and so on; consequently, some students grasp the material quickly, while others are slower to understand it. As a result, students who experience difficulties tend to fall behind in class, lack the confidence to ask questions or express their opinions, and achieve suboptimal learning outcomes (Rahmawati & Negara, 2021; Ramadhan & As, 2024). This situation highlights the need to identify various forms of learning difficulties and their underlying causes so that learning strategies can be developed that are more effective and tailored to the needs of students.

Teachers must employ methods that make students feel comfortable, engaged, and able to understand the material being taught. Good teachers will have a wealth of ideas and knowledge about how students can best and most effectively grasp the material, ensuring that students take away valuable insights to apply at home (Akrim & Harfiani, 2025; Anam & Fauji, 2021; Ichwan et al., 2024; Jabbar et al., 2017; Maskuri et al., 2022). A good teacher who prepares both the material and themselves before presenting to students will have a significant impact on the students, creating a comfortable classroom environment and helping students focus more on the material presented. Therefore, teaching methods, the learning environment, and the classroom atmosphere greatly influence students' learning outcomes.

Conversely, if a teacher's teaching methods lack variety focusing on a single method in every session without introducing anything new students will become bored and disengaged. Consequently, the material they receive will affect their comprehension, which in turn impacts their learning progress. If this situation continues, it will give rise to various challenges, such as low motivation to learn and a decline in students' interest in understanding the learning material.

This is especially true for Islamic boarding schools that still operate in a traditional manner; these institutions uphold the pure values that reflect the essence of Islamic boarding schools, unaffected by modern developments. The teaching and learning process is still conducted manually, without any technological assistance. The question is whether the difficulties in teaching and learning still exist or remain the same for every student.

Learning difficulties arise because the learning process can easily become tedious. In essence, learning is a process of behavioral change and knowledge

acquisition that requires effort, practice, and adaptation. Each student has different initial abilities, so when they are presented with new material, some are able to understand it quickly, while others need more time, guidance, and repetition. These differences make learning difficulties a natural phenomenon that is almost always encountered in every learning activity.

A search of the Scopus database for studies on the difficulties of studying the Kitab Kuning yielded two documents from 2024–2026, but none of them focused on Islamic boarding schools. This analysis clearly shows that no documents related to the difficulties of studying the Kitab Kuning in Islamic boarding schools have been found. The following is a visualization of the VOSviewer bibliometric analysis based on the themes “Kitab Kuning,” “Islamic School,” and “Islam.”

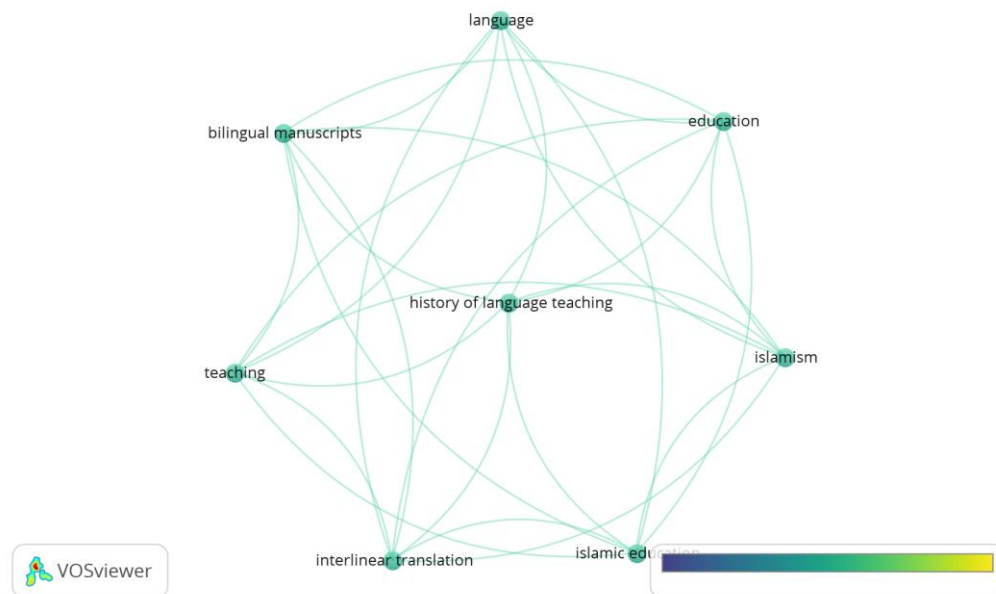


Fig 1. Vosviewer visualization analysis related to research on the Kitab Kuning, based on the keywords “Exploration,” “Difficulties,” “Kitab Kuning,” and “Islamic boarding schools” (Scopus database, 2024–2026)

When it comes to studying classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) at Islamic boarding schools, these challenges become even more complex. Students are not only required to understand the content of the material but must also master linguistic tools such as nahwu and sharaf, comprehend classical Arabic vocabulary, and be able to apply linguistic rules when reading texts that are generally unvoweled (kitab gundul). Differences in students’ foundational abilities, a lack of mastery of the linguistic tools, low motivation, and teaching methods that remain conventional are factors that cause difficulties in learning the classical Islamic texts to persist. This study will examine the difficulties students encounter in learning the classical Islamic texts. Therefore, an in-depth identification of the various factors causing these difficulties is necessary so that teachers or ustadz can determine appropriate teaching strategies and help students achieve their learning objectives optimally.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative method using a case study design. Data were collected through individual and group interviews with two informants, both

of whom were students (Engkizar, Jaafar, Alias, et al., 2025; Guspita et al., 2025; Ikhlas et al., 2025; Wulandari et al., 2024). All informants were selected using purposive sampling. All data were analyzed thematically using the Miles and Huberman interactive technique. The analysis was conducted repeatedly to identify themes related to students' learning difficulties, thereby yielding a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study. Data validity was ensured through member checking to confirm that the researchers' interpretations aligned with the experiences and information provided by the informants (Engkizar, Jaafar, Hamzah, et al., 2025; Khairunisa et al., 2025; Nasier, 2018; Shofa Sayyidatul Husna, 2025). This approach allows the researcher to obtain a comprehensive picture of the factors that cause learning difficulties. Thus, the research results are expected to provide an in-depth description and serve as a foundation for formulating efforts to improve the learning process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study of Arabic is an integral part of the educational system in Islamic boarding schools. Arabic is taught because it is the primary language for understanding the sources of Islamic teachings, such as the Qur'an, hadith, books of exegesis, fiqh, creed, and classical Islamic texts. Therefore, nearly all Islamic boarding schools designate Arabic as a core subject, both to develop language proficiency and as a tool for understanding the body of Islamic scholarship.

The study of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) at Islamic boarding schools (pondok pesantren) is a common practice, as this is an iconic feature of such institutions. However, although Arabic language instruction has become widespread in these schools, its success is not always consistent. Many students still struggle to understand the material, master the rules of nahwu and sharaf, expand their vocabulary, or apply Arabic in daily communication (Afjalurrahmansyah et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2022; Mu'awwanah et al., 2023). These differences in ability are influenced by various factors, such as educational background, motivation to learn, the teaching methods used by teachers, the language environment, and the basic abilities of each student.

In practice, the learning process for classical Islamic texts does not always proceed as intended. Differences in students' foundational abilities, mastery of linguistic tools, and the learning process that takes place in the classroom can affect their level of understanding of the material being studied. These conditions indicate that understanding classical Islamic texts is determined not only by the ability to memorize the material but also by students' ability to develop an understanding of the structure of the Arabic language, which serves as the primary medium for conveying the texts' content.

Based on the results of the data analysis, this study found that the difficulties experienced by students in learning the Kitab Kuning centered on three main, interrelated aspects. These three aspects indicate that the obstacles faced by students are not only related to understanding the content of the kitab kuning but also to basic Arabic language skills, which serve as the foundation for reading and comprehending the text. These findings were then analyzed and discussed in the discussion section to be examined; there are three difficulties in learning the kitab kuning at Islamic boarding schools:

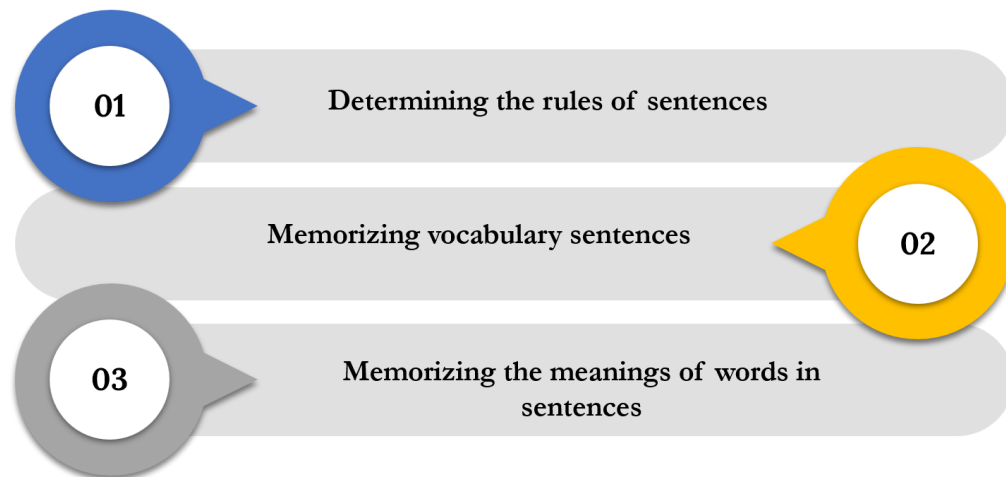


Fig 1. Students' difficulties in studying the "Kitab Kuning

Students' Difficulties in Identifying Sentence Rules

Every student has different abilities when it comes to understanding learning materials, which is natural since these abilities are influenced by factors such as learning readiness, learning speed, learning styles, and individual learning profiles. In the study of sentence rules, learning readiness is a crucial factor because understanding Arabic grammatical rules is hierarchical; thus, mastery of basic concepts such as word classification, *i'rab*, types of nouns, verbs, and particles, as well as syntactic functions within sentences is a prerequisite for understanding more complex material (Afiah et al., 2025; Anisnaini, 2021). Students who lack this readiness tend to experience difficulties when asked to identify the grammatical rules of a sentence, as they are not yet able to identify the elements that make up a sentence or the grammatical relationships between words.

The main difficulty students face in learning the Kitab Kuning is identifying the grammatical rules of a sentence. This was conveyed by the informant

The hardest part is determining the i'rab. I'm often confused about whether a word should be read with a dhammah, fathah, kasrah, or sukun. Sometimes I think I'm right, but after the ustad explains it, it turns out I'm wrong (informant).

In addition, a learning process that focuses more on the content of the textbook than on the discussion of the rules of nahwu and sharaf prevents students from fully understanding the structure of the Arabic language. The informant explained this as follows:

textbook instruction often moves on to other material before the previous topic has been fully understood, leading to misunderstandings or confusion regarding the main points of a given topic.

These findings indicate that mastery of nahwu and sharaf is the primary foundation for reading classical Islamic texts. Without a command of these two auxiliary disciplines (grammar and morphology), students will have difficulty determining the function of each word, which will affect their understanding of the

text's content (Muhammad Syu'aib & M.Husni, 2025; Nadhory & Rifa'i, 2025; Septiani et al., 2019; Wijaya & Rismawati, 2023). This situation aligns with the characteristics of classical Islamic texts, which are generally written without vowel marks, requiring readers to determine grammatical case independently. Therefore, teachers need to allocate more time to exercises in grammatical analysis so that students not only understand the text's content but also grasp the underlying linguistic structure.

Difficulties in Memorizing Vocabulary

Difficulty memorizing vocabulary is one of the challenges many students face when studying classical Islamic texts. Mastery of vocabulary is a crucial aspect because understanding the content of these texts depends not only on mastery of the rules of grammar and morphology but also on the ability to recognize the meaning of each word in the text. Limited vocabulary mastery causes students to face obstacles when reading, translating, or comprehending the content of classical Islamic texts in its entirety (Damanik & Nasution, 2024; Zainuri & Jannah, 2023). Based on the interview results, students revealed that the large number of new vocabulary words encountered in the classical Islamic texts is one of the main factors causing them difficulty in memorizing and recalling the meaning of each term, thereby slowing down the process of understanding the material being studied.

Another factor is that learning speed also influences each student's development. Learning speed refers to the difference in the time each student needs to understand and master a given learning material. When studying sentence rules (qawā'id kalimat), some students are able to quickly grasp the concepts of i'rāb, word positions, and changes in vowel marks, while others require repeated explanations, intensive practice, and step-by-step guidance (Achadah & Aini, 2021; Radiatul Jannah et al., 2024; Yenti & Aminudin, 2026). These differences in learning pace lead to disparities in mastery of the material within the classroom. When instruction proceeds at the pace of the majority of students, those with a slower learning pace are at risk of falling behind, making it difficult for them to accurately identify sentence rules. Conversely, students who grasp the material more quickly tend to find it easier to analyze sentence structure and apply grammatical rules to various types of texts.

In addition to difficulties with grammar rules, the research findings indicate that students also struggle with memorizing vocabulary. This was conveyed by an informant:

"The large number of new vocabulary words in the classical Islamic texts makes it difficult for us to remember each term," said the informant.

On the other hand, the large number of texts studied simultaneously makes the memorization burden even heavier. This was conveyed by an informant:

"Teachers often move on to the next topic before the previous material has been fully covered, resulting in us not having enough time to memorize and understand the vocabulary properly before being presented with new material" (informant).

Difficulty memorizing vocabulary indicates that mastery of vocabulary is one of the key requirements for understanding classical Islamic texts. Other contributing factors include a rushed learning system and teaching methods that are difficult to understand. The fewer vocabulary words students master, the more difficult it is for them to understand the content of the text (Ghofur & Husniah, 2022). This results

in a slow reading process because students must constantly look up the meanings of words they do not yet understand. This situation underscores that vocabulary memorization is not merely a matter of individual student ability but is also heavily influenced by how the material is presented in a coherent, structured manner and at a pace that aligns with students' ability to absorb the information.

Therefore, vocabulary instruction must be conducted gradually through repeated practice and linked to the use of words in sentences to make them easier to remember.

Difficulties in Memorizing the Meanings of Vocabulary Words

Difficulty in memorizing the meanings of vocabulary words is one of the obstacles that affects students' comprehension when studying classical Islamic texts. Mastering the meaning of each vocabulary word is an essential prerequisite for students to understand the content of the text, grasp the author's intent, and accurately connect the meanings across sentences. However, the large number of Arabic vocabulary words with diverse meanings, their contextual usage, and the lack of repetition in the learning process make it difficult for students to recall the meanings of the vocabulary they have learned. This situation slows down the process of understanding the text's content, as students must repeatedly consult a dictionary or ask for the meanings of vocabulary words they encounter.

Another factor is that learning styles also influence student development. A learning style refers to an individual's preference in receiving, processing, and understanding information (Afroni & Lutfi, 2021; Kusumaning et al., 2022; Sholeh Afandi & Budianto, 2025; Zulmuqim, 2017). In learning sentence rules (qawā'id kalimat), students with a visual learning style generally find it easier to understand the material through i'rāb diagrams, concept maps, rule tables, or color-coding of sentence elements. Meanwhile, students with an auditory learning style benefit more from verbal explanations, discussions, and verbal repetition of the material.

Further research findings indicate that students not only have difficulty memorizing individual vocabulary words but also struggle to recall their meanings. This was reported by an informant.

"We often forget the meanings of the vocabulary we've learned, so we have difficulty translating the text into Indonesian properly and accurately" (Informant).

These difficulties indicate that the process of memorizing the meanings of vocabulary requires constant repetition. Understanding the meanings of vocabulary words is not sufficient through memorization alone; it must also be accompanied by practice using the words in various contexts (Amirudin & Rohimah, 2020; Chopizah Nurma, 2025; Htay et al., 2025). Thus, students do not merely remember meanings temporarily but are able to use them when reading and understanding the content of the classical Islamic texts. This difficulty indicates that vocabulary mastery and meaning comprehension are two distinct yet interconnected aspects; students may recognize a word but may not necessarily be able to interpret its meaning in the correct context.

CONCLUSION

The research findings indicate that the process of understanding classical Islamic texts remains a challenge for students because it requires mastery of various interrelated language competencies. The obstacles they face are not limited to grammatical aspects but also include vocabulary mastery, which serves as the

foundation for understanding the text's content. Limitations in one of these aspects have implications for the others, causing students to struggle with reading, analyzing, and fully grasping the meaning contained in the classical Islamic texts. These findings indicate that learning the "kitab kuning" requires a more comprehensive strategy that focuses on strengthening grammatical skills, enriching vocabulary, and fostering a habit of sustained reading. Thus, students are expected to develop a more systematic understanding of the "kitab kuning" texts and gradually improve their reading proficiency.

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DECLARATIONS

Author contribution

Nahdia Safira Arsyah: Data curation, Writing-Original draft preparation, **Afifah Salsabila Defri:** Writing-Reviewing and Editing, **Rosi Guspita:** Visualization, Supervision, **Zainul Arifin:** Formal analysis, Conceptualization, **Chaerunnisa Riswan:** Methodology, **Syakia Derjati:** Validation, Supervision, Software.

AI Statement

The data and the grammatical structure in this article have been validated and verified by English language experts and no AI-generated sentences are included in this article.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that this research was conducted without any conflict of interest in the research.

Ethical clearance

The research company has agreed to carry out the research and is willing if the results of this research are published.

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