



## Improving Qur'anic Literacy through the Tafahhum Method: A Qualitative Case Study

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### Abstract

*This study examines the use of the tafahhum method in improving Quranic literacy among students at the Institut Ilmu Al Quran Jakarta. It begins from the concern that Quranic learning often emphasizes fluent recitation and memorization more than meaningful understanding. Using a qualitative case study design, the research involved 30 undergraduate students from the 2022 cohort and 3 lecturers of tahsin and tahfiz. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi structured interviews, documentation, and student response sheets used as supporting descriptive material. The findings show that students' Quranic literacy was generally strong in recitation, but still uneven in tajwid accuracy and comprehension of meaning. Tafahhum was practiced in tahsin, tahfiz, and murojaah sessions through guided explanation, reflective engagement, and contextual connection between verses and everyday life. However, not all students were able to engage the process equally well. Some still struggled to explain the meanings of memorized verses, connect verses thematically, and relate Quranic messages to lived experience. These difficulties were influenced by differences in Arabic proficiency, educational background, interpretive readiness, and confidence in active participation. The study concludes that tafahhum plays an important role in bridging recitation and comprehension. Its successful implementation, however, depends on sustained pedagogical guidance, contextual learning, language support, and collaborative classroom practices that help students engage the Quran as both a recited and meaningful text.*

## Introduction

Indonesia is widely recognized as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. According to data from the Pew Research Center (2023) and Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2022), approximately 87.2 percent of Indonesia's population, or more than 236 million people, identify as Muslim. As a religion that embodies the principle of rahmatan lil 'alamin, Islam offers comprehensive guidance for human life, encompassing ethical relations with fellow human beings, care for animals, and environmental preservation (Nata, 2018). These values were exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who is described in the Qur'an as uswah hasanah (a noble role model) in Surah Al-Ahzab (33:21). Consequently, the moral and ethical values demonstrated by the Prophet should serve as a foundational framework for character formation among Indonesian Muslims, ensuring that Islamic teachings extend beyond ritual observance and are reflected in social ethics and humanitarian conduct (Shihab, 2002).

The Qur'an occupies a central position in Islamic life as the primary source of guidance. It is not merely intended to be recited but also to be studied, understood, and internalized in order to grasp its linguistic, semantic, and ethical dimensions. For this reason, various Qur'anic sciences such as tajwid, qira'at, translation, and tafsir have developed to facilitate a deeper

engagement with the text (Hidayati & Gufron, 2024). However, contemporary Qur'anic literacy practices, particularly in Indonesia, often emphasize recitation accuracy (tilawah) and phonetic proficiency, sometimes at the expense of meaningful comprehension (Basir et al., 2024; M. Hasan, 2018; Hasibuan et al., 2025; Lubis, 2020). This phenomenon has resulted in a gap between the ability to read the Qur'an fluently and the capacity to understand its messages holistically, a challenge that continues to persist in both formal and non-formal educational settings.

Scholars have increasingly highlighted this disparity between recitation and comprehension as a critical issue in Qur'anic education (Gent & Muhammad, 2019; Munzir, 2023). While mastery of pronunciation and adherence to tajwid rules are undeniably important, an exclusive focus on these aspects may limit students' engagement with the Qur'an's meanings and ethical teachings (Nurohmah et al., 2025). Several studies demonstrate that learners who excel in recitation often struggle to interpret, contextualize, and apply Qur'anic messages in their daily lives (Abdullah & Rahim, 2021; Ependi et al., 2023; Hussein et al., 2025; Rahma et al., 2023). This imbalance underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that integrate reading skills with semantic understanding (Agustina et al., 2020), reflection, and application, particularly within Islamic higher education institutions that are responsible for producing intellectually and spiritually grounded graduates (Permana & Hasanah, 2024; Sahin, 2024).

In response to this challenge, the tafahhum method has emerged as a meaning-oriented approach to Qur'anic learning. Etymologically derived from the Arabic root *fahima* (to understand), tafahhum refers to a deep, reflective process of comprehending Qur'anic verses beyond surface-level reading or memorization (Anggraini et al., 2022; Febriyanti et al., 2022; Jannah, 2023; Ulumiyah et al., 2020). In the context of Islamic education, this method emphasizes understanding meanings, historical contexts, and moral wisdom embedded within the verses, thereby transforming memorization into a meaningful spiritual and intellectual experience. Classical scholars such as Al-Ghazali asserted that authentic Qur'anic learning progresses from tilawah (recitation) to tafahhum (understanding), followed by tadabbur (reflection) and ultimately 'amal (practice), positioning tafahhum as a crucial bridge between knowledge acquisition and ethical transformation.

From a contemporary educational perspective, the tafahhum method aligns closely with constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes learners' active role in constructing knowledge through experience and reflection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In Islamic higher education, this approach supports a humanistic and transformative model of da'wah through education, where teaching prioritizes meaning-making rather than mere transmission of information (B. R. Hakim, 2025; Sahin, 2024). Through tafahhum-based learning, students are encouraged to become subjects of da'wah individuals who embody Qur'anic values in their behavior, discourse, and social engagement rather than passive recipients of religious instruction (Hasan, 2018). This orientation is particularly relevant in the context of modern higher education, which increasingly demands critical thinking, ethical awareness, and social responsibility.

Islamic higher education institutions therefore hold a strategic responsibility in promoting comprehensive Qur'anic literacy that integrates recitation, understanding, and application. Studies emphasize that universities specializing in Islamic studies must balance intellectual rigor with spiritual development, ensuring that Qur'anic education remains relevant to contemporary challenges faced by Muslim societies (Nasrulloh & Mela, 2021; Nata, 2018). Programmatic initiatives such as structured Qur'anic learning communities and integrative curricula have shown positive impacts on students' motivation and engagement with the

Qur'an (Agustina et al., 2020). Nevertheless, significant challenges persist, including limited Arabic language proficiency, diverse learning styles, insufficient reflective learning practices, and a prevailing tendency among some students to prioritize memorization over comprehension (Rahma et al., 2023).

Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine the strategies employed to enhance Qur'anic literacy through the tafahhum method at the Institut Ilmu Al-Qur'an (IIQ) Jakarta. Specifically, it seeks to identify instructional strategies that emphasize understanding Qur'anic meanings alongside memorization, as well as to explore the challenges faced by students in implementing tafahhum-based learning. Furthermore, this study evaluates the effectiveness of teaching methods applied by lecturers in fostering reflective awareness, critical engagement with Qur'anic meanings, and the internalization of Qur'anic values in students' academic and spiritual lives. By addressing these dimensions, the research aspires to contribute to the development of a more integrative and meaningful Qur'anic learning model one that genuinely guides students "from letters to meaning."

## Methods

### Research Design

This paper was a qualitative case study, which aimed to know in details how the tafahhum technique had been implemented in the bid to enhance Quranic literacy among students at the Institut Ilmu Al Quran Jakarta. It was decided to use a qualitative orientation to this inquiry as the purpose of the study was not to test the relationships among causal variables or come to the statistical generalizations. Rather it was interested in analyzing the processes of education, pedagogical relationships and the experienced challenges when students became prompted to abandon correct recitation to meaningful interpretation of Quranic verses.

The case study design was specifically applicable, since the introduction of tafahhum in this context could not be divorced of the institutional culture of Quranic learning, the academic demands that were made on students, and the specific teaching practices that were created by lecturers in tahsin and tahfiz classes. By design, the study was in a position to treat tafahhum not only as the technical means of teaching, but as the form of pedagogical experience placed in the larger intellectual and spiritual context of the Islamic higher education. This method has been able to capture the observable teaching practices as well as the less evident aspects of student learning, uncertainty, adjustment, and contemplation.

### Research Setting and Participants

The research was held in the Institut Ilmu Al Quran Jakarta, the Islamic higher educational facility where the Quran teaching takes the centre stage in the academic and moral education of the students. The choice of this setting is due to the fact that it offers a purposeful background in the study of how recitation, memorization, and understanding integrate in formal Quranic studies. In such an atmosphere, tafahhum is not just another practice, but a component of a larger vision to produce students who can not merely learn the Quran by sound and memory, but by meaning and moral consciousness (Karwatka, 2010).

The sample of this research involved 30 undergraduate students of the 2022 group and 3 lecturers who taught tahsin and tahfiz directly. Students were used as they are the main learners who underwent tafahhum introduction in their Quranic learning, and lecturers were used since they had a direct influence on the development of instructional strategies, leading recitation, and addressing learning issues of students. The consideration of both groups enabled the study to take the phenomenon as a complementary phenomenon hence enhancing the level of

interpretation as well as bringing about a deeper comprehension of how tafahhum operated in real classroom and memorizing contexts.

### **Data Collection**

The collection of the data was based on the classroom observation, semi structured interviews, documentation, and written answers of the students which served as supportive descriptive information. The methods used were not intended to generate individual and competing datasets, but to put light on the same phenomenon in different perspectives. Through the various types of evidence, the study was in a position to develop a more grounded description of the introduction, practice, negotiation, and experience of the tafahhum method in the day-to-day lives of the Quranic learning at IIQ Jakarta.

It observed tahsin, tahfiz, and murojaah sessions in order to have a real picture of the teaching and learning as it played out in practice. The specific focus was placed on how lecturers managed to lead students through recitation, provide them with the meaning of verses, correct pronunciation and ponder the moral messages of the text of the Quran. The patterns that are not always evident in the interviews, which were revealed with the help of observation, included reluctance of students to explain the meanings and their different levels of participation, as well as the process of embedding comprehension into the memorization tasks. In this respect, observation was not only necessary to write down observable classroom behavior, but also it was necessary to know the pedagogical climate in which tafahhum was practiced.

The semi structured interviews were conducted with the lecturers to determine their pedagogical concerns, their conception of tafahhum as well as their view of the strength of students and their weaknesses in Quranic literacy. The interview format enabled the researcher to prepare guiding questions besides being in a position to leave space to enable the participants to expand on issues that arose naturally based on their teaching experience. Such conversations enabled the study to gain an access to the explanations that were not visible directly such as the rationale of lecturers who combine memorization with meaning guided teaching, the problems they had to face when working with students who have varying educational backgrounds as well as what they thought about the conditions under which tafahhum could be effectively applied.

Observation and interview data were supported by documentation which provided written and visual records of learning practices. These materials were teaching records, learning notes, institutional documents connected with teaching the Quran and other pertinent materials that assisted to put the findings into the overall context of the academic activities at the institution. Besides these sources, written student responses were also checked as the support material to give a bigger picture of student experiences, challenges, and the degree of engagement with tafahhum oriented learning. These written answers were not handled as the foundation of the statistical analysis, but were interpreted in qualitative way in order to add to the knowledge of the recurring patterns that were observable and interviewed as well.

### **Research Instrument**

The researcher is the main tool in the process of qualitative inquiry, and he/she does not merely gather the data but also interprets the data and makes meaning of the data. The researcher, in this research, played the role of a key tool that would be in the classroom observing the classroom interactions, conducting interviews, arranging documentary materials and making interpretations of meanings that were brought out of the field. This position demanded

alertness, self-awareness and responsiveness to both verbal and non-verbal aspects of Quranic learning activities.

The researcher employed a number of guiding tools in this field to facilitate this role. The preparation of an observation guide was aimed at assisting in the focus of attention on the primary features of the classroom interaction, i.e., the provision of meaning explanation, the reaction of students to direction by the lecturer, the patterns of pronunciation difficulty, and the instances when memorization was related to understanding. A guide on the interviews was also created so that interviews with lecturers always followed the core issues of the study and at the same time provided space where unexpected information may arise. Response summaries and documentation sheets were also structured in a systematic way at such a manner that the interpretive process would not be rooted in a fragmented impression but in a consistent body of evidence.

### **Data Analysis**

The interactive model of Miles and Huberman was applied in the analysis of the data, it presupposes data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions under constant verification. The model was selected due to the fact that it enables the process of qualitative analysis to be conducted as an ongoing and reflective process as opposed to a strict sequence that is accomplished once the entire data has been gathered. Within the framework of this paper, the analysis was built up over time as the researcher swapped between the notes made on the observations, the transcripts of the interviews, the documentary content, and the writing of the students to recognize the most frequent themes and significant connections between them.

The initial phase was data reduction where raw field materials were chosen, organized as well as narrowed down, based on central concerns of the research. At this point, the researcher has found data on the strategies of instruction, types of tafahhum practice, technical and interpretive challenges faced by students and the institutional intervention applied to enhance Quranic literacy. This step was not aimed at the simplification of data, but at the appeal to the sharpness of analytical focus, because in this way the most significant dimensions of the phenomenon could be studied more attentively.

The second phase was the data display where the materials that were organized were displayed in a manner that the patterns were easier to read. Grouping of themes was based on conceptual relevance and empirical repeatability which enabled the researcher to compare the emergence of certain issues in the various sources of data. As an example, the challenges experienced by students in linking recitation of material with its comprehension were not interpreted as detached issues, but were analyzed in dependence on the classroom observations, the lecturer explanations, and the documentary evidences that depicted the pedagogical background within which those problems arose.

The last step was drawing conclusion and verification. At this stage, it was through incremental development of interpretations that these were verified over and over again against the data such that the emerging claims were always based on field evidence. It was not based on a single observation or a single statement made in the interview, rather on the conglomeration of several sources that uniformly led to similar trends. It is based on this analytical process that the study was able to come up with a subtle insight into how tafahhum helped in the development of Quranic literacy coupled with the identification of the instructional and learner related constraints that curtailed its use in practice.

## Results and Discussion

### The Existing Condition of Students' Qur'anic Literacy

The current state of Quranic literacy of students in the Institut Ilmu Al Quran Jakarta is a promising state, but still characterized by significant shortcomings. Overall, the students already had a rather high level of reading the Quran. In the classroom learning experience, they could recite in a consistent rhythm, continue on the same verse to the other and keep with the text with a familiarity that showed the experience of previous learning. Their reading did not imply that they were coming into the classroom as utter beginners. Rather, it demonstrated that they already had a form of minimum recital underpinning which enabled them to attend tahsin, tahfiz and murojaah sessions actively. This situation is significant since it shows that the most significant difficulty encountered by the institution was not only familiarizing students with reading Quran but also enhancing and sharpening a skill that was in place at the practical level.

That training, however, was not so uniform in every way in respect of literacy. After the recitation process was monitored more keenly, it became clear that fluency was not necessarily precise. A number of the students remained inconsistent in the use of elaborate tajwid systems, particularly when it comes to differentiating between tafkhir and tarqiq. This was seen especially in pronunciation of letters like sad, dad and qaf where they kept having to be corrected whenever they were reading. In the draft findings, it is also observed that approximately 68 percent of the students continued to have problems in this area and it was observed that technical refinement was one of the resolvable problems among a significant portion of the participants. This situation was explained in a very straightforward manner by one of the lecturers.

*“When the students read continuously, they often sound fluent at first, but once we listen more closely, some of the letters are still not pronounced with the right weight. They can continue reading, but the precision is not always there yet.”*

This reflection helps clarify that the students' literacy had indeed advanced, but that it was still developing in terms of accuracy and control.

The picture became even more nuanced when attention shifted from pronunciation to comprehension. A number of students who appeared quite capable in recitation became uncertain when asked to explain what the verses meant, what message they contained, or how they might be related to everyday moral and spiritual life. In other words, confidence in reading was not always accompanied by confidence in understanding. This gap between recitation and meaning is already visible in the draft findings, where technical proficiency is described as not always being followed by a deep understanding of the verses being read. One of the lecturers expressed this situation with striking clarity.

*“Many of them can read well and even memorize with discipline, but when we ask what the verse is actually saying, some of them stop and think for a long time. It is not because they are incapable, but because they are more trained to repeat than to explain.”*

What appears here is not a failure of learning, but a sign that literacy in this setting still tended to rest more securely at the level of sound than at the level of meaning.

This condition also became visible when students were encouraged to relate Quranic verses to lived experience. Some of them could continue reciting without major interruption, yet found it difficult to state the central message of a passage in their own words or connect it with ethical situations outside the classroom. In the view of the lecturers, this was precisely where the deeper challenge of Quranic literacy emerged. One tahfiz lecturer explained,

“The students are generally not weak in reading. What they still need is help to enter the meaning. They can memorize the verse, but connecting the verse with life, with values, and with reflection, that is where guidance is still needed.”

Another lecturer offered a similar impression and emphasized that Qur’anic literacy should not be judged only by outward fluency.

*“If literacy is understood only as being able to read smoothly, then many of our students are already good. But if literacy also means understanding, awareness, and being able to grasp the message of the verse, then some of them are still in the process of growing.”*

These descriptions provide a more real and down-to-earth perspective of the condition of the students. They were not illiterate and neither were they totally literate. It was already established in one dimension, but was yet to be articulated in another.

The current state of Quranic literacy of students at IIQ Jakarta can thus be seen as a state of relative weakness. The students were already past an elementary level and had acquired enough fluency to participate in higher level of Quranic learning exercises. Meanwhile, they were not yet fully integrated in their literacy, as the reading fluency, tajwid accuracy, and meaningful understanding had not been equally developed. Such unequal development contributes to the achievement of the tafahhum method in this context. The educational task was not only to make students recite with more fluency, but to direct the students to a more profound activity with the Quran as a text to be interpreted, contemplated and acted up in interaction.

### **The Practice of Tafahhum in Qur’anic Learning Sessions**

The tafahhum practises in the Quranic learning classes in the Institut Ilmu Al Quran Jakarta was not an isolated form of teaching, but a living component of the teaching process, where the recitation was slowly interlinked with the comprehension. This became more pronounced in tahsin, tahfiz and murojaah sessions where the learning environment was not aimed at maintaining fluency and memorizing only, but also assisting students in getting into the meaning of the verses that they were reading. Tafahhum in this context was done by creating small yet meaningful pedagogical pauses where lecturers stopped the recitation, highlighted certain verses and encouraged students to question what the text was saying. It was not necessarily a long and or formally exegetical process but it did have a significant role to play in changing the direction of learning back to repetition only to reflection and awareness.

This practice could be evidently expressed when performing murojaah activities. As outlined in the draft, lecturers would open the mushaf, point to specific verses, and give short explanations regarding their meaning and context or some moral implications before the students resumed their recitation. Such a simple sequence put a very different dimension to the learning process. Memorization as a purely mechanical act was no longer considered, as the students were constantly shown that verses they knew by heart had their guidance as well, which had to be interpreted. Through this, tafahhum was not taught as an independent curriculum that is outside recitation. Instead, it was embedded into the music of the day-to-day learning in the way that learning the passages once again made the task of learning the passages to be once again a chance to learn the meaning.

The peculiarity of the given practice was that lecturers placed the understanding as the sound that should follow the text. They did not limit themselves to the process of correcting pronunciation or checking the continuity of memorization and attempted to create a gap where students would be entitled to cogitate about the message of the verses. The teaching orientation explained by one of the lecturers stated,

*“When students come to murojaah, we do not want them to only repeat what is already in memory. We try to ask what the verse means, what lesson it carries, and why it matters. Even a brief explanation can help them realize that memorization should not stand alone.”*

This reflection helps clarify that tafahhum in this setting was not built through abstract theory alone, but through repeated pedagogical habits that slowly trained students to see the Quran as a text that must be approached with both voice and understanding.

The learning sessions also showed that tafahhum was often practiced through guidance that linked the verse to familiar moral situations. Lecturers did not always provide long interpretive explanations, yet they regularly introduced concise remarks that helped students see the relevance of the passage. A verse was not left as an object of recitation only, but was gently brought closer to the students’ ethical and spiritual world. One tahfiz lecturer explained this point in a way that captures the spirit of the classroom practice.

*“Sometimes students only need a short bridge. If we explain the main idea of the verse and relate it to something close to their life, they begin to read it differently. The verse is no longer just something to be memorized, but something to be felt and understood.”*

This kind of intervention may appear modest on the surface, yet within the learning process it carried a transformative function, because it helped students recognize that Qur’anic study involves inward engagement as much as verbal mastery.

Another important feature of tafahhum practice in these sessions was its role in strengthening the connection between memorization and retention. The draft notes that this approach helped students reflect on the content of the verses instead of focusing only on verbal repetition. This suggests that understanding was not treated as an optional enrichment, but as something that could reinforce the memorization process itself. When students were able to recognize the basic message or internal logic of a passage, their memorization became more meaningful and potentially more durable. One lecturer expressed this connection very clearly.

*“Students usually remember better when they know what they are reading. If the verse already has meaning in their mind, the memorization becomes stronger because it is not only stored in the tongue, but also in understanding.”*

These comments are indicative of the fact that tafahhum was not only perceived as an additional spiritual practice, but also perceived as a pedagogical tool that enhanced the nature of learning.

Meanwhile, the application of tafahhum in the classroom practice was a moderate and contextual one. The lecture sessions were not converted into tahsin or tahfiz classes, and students were not overly taxed with interpretive problems that were too high. What they developed more was a first degree of effective interaction, sufficient to bring students to an understanding of the overall direction of the verse and to relate the recitation to awareness. It is significant as it demonstrates that tafahhum in this study was taken in the practical educational meaning. It was not directed to the generation of formal exegetical mastery, but to the avoidance of students lingering on the surface of reading. The pedagogical moderation of the tafahhum practice was in this sense, a moderation that was sensitive to the centrality of recitation and memorization and which was not inclined to allow them to be deprived of meaning.

Learning experiences at IIQ Jakarta indicate that tafahhum was performed using a pattern of instructive explanation, thought provoking questioning, and situational association entrenched in the context of daily Quranic teaching. Its existence might be observed in the manner lecturers

took a break during recitation and explained the intended meaning, in the manner they encouraged the students to observe some moral teachings, and in the manner memorizing was progressively guided to understanding. This transformed tafahhum into less of a symbolic term, and more of a practical classroom pedagogic orientation. By these practices, the students were led onwards one step more than merely to preserve the form of the verses, towards starting to deal with their substance.

### **The Gap Between Fluent Recitation and Meaningful Comprehension**

Although students at the Institut Ilmu Al Quran Jakarta generally showed confidence and fluency in reciting the Quran, the learning process revealed that this fluency did not always grow alongside an equally strong grasp of meaning. In many classroom situations, students were able to continue reading with an orderly rhythm and acceptable pronunciation, yet became uncertain when the focus shifted from sound to substance. The moment they were asked to explain the message of a verse, identify its moral direction, or relate it to everyday life, their confidence often changed into hesitation. This shows that the students' engagement with the Quran was not uniform across all dimensions of literacy. Their oral familiarity with the text had developed more visibly than their interpretive familiarity with what the text conveyed.

This gap became one of the most important findings in the study because it clarified that technical progress in recitation should not be mistaken for a complete achievement of Qur'anic literacy. A number of students who appeared strong in phonetic control and tajwid performance still found it difficult to explain the meaning of the verses they had read or memorized. In practical terms, they could preserve the form of the text without yet entering its message in a fuller sense. The draft itself makes this point quite clearly by stating that technical reading proficiency did not always correlate with students' understanding of Qur'anic meanings, and that several students who demonstrated strong phonetic and tajwid skills still struggled to connect their recitation with the moral and contextual messages of the verses. This suggests that literacy in this setting was still often anchored in correct performance rather than in reflective comprehension.

The lecturers' reflections help illuminate the depth of this problem. One lecturer explained that students often looked capable as long as the activity remained within the boundaries of recitation, but their difficulties emerged more clearly when they were asked to speak about meaning. In the lecturer's words,

*“When they read, many of them look ready and confident. But when we ask what the verse actually means, or what lesson can be taken from it, some of them become quiet. At that point we can see that the reading has gone forward, but the understanding has not always followed.”*

This observation is significant because it shows that the gap was not merely about lack of vocabulary or limited explanatory skill. It reflected a deeper pattern in which the students had been more intensively formed in repetition than in reflection.

A similar concern emerged in another interview, where a lecturer emphasized that many students were able to memorize and recite with discipline, yet still needed strong guidance when invited to interpret the verse at a basic level. As the lecturer explained,

*“Some students can continue reading very well, and even their memorization is quite strong, but when they are asked to say what the verse is pointing to, they are still unsure. It is as if the verse is already present on the tongue, but not yet fully present in understanding.”*

This statement captures the central tension of the finding in a particularly vivid way. It suggests that recitation and comprehension were not developing as a single unified process, but often as two separate layers of learning that had not yet been fully brought together.

The gap also became apparent when students were encouraged to connect Quranic passages with practical moral life. Some of them could repeat the verse correctly, yet had difficulty identifying its ethical implication or its relevance beyond the immediate lesson. This means that the issue was not only semantic in a narrow sense. It was also reflective and applicative. Understanding had not yet matured into a form that enabled students to speak about the text as guidance. One lecturer articulated this with notable clarity by saying,

*“Reading alone is not the final goal. The problem appears when students can recite fluently but still do not know how the verse speaks to life. At that stage we realize that the challenge is no longer pronunciation, but how to open the meaning in a way they can truly receive.”*

Through this lens, the gap between recitation and comprehension appears not as a minor weakness, but as the central educational problem that gives the tafahhum method its urgency.

Seen more broadly, this finding suggests that memorization and recitation practices that remain focused only on mechanical correctness are not sufficient to produce deeper forms of Quranic literacy. Students may become fluent readers while still remaining distant from the ethical and conceptual force of the verses they read. For that reason, the gap identified in this study should not be read simply as an individual limitation among several students. It should be understood as a pedagogical signal that recitation based learning must be accompanied by consistent efforts to cultivate understanding. In the context of IIQ Jakarta, this gap explains why tafahhum was not treated as a peripheral enrichment, but as a necessary bridge between reading well and understanding well. Without such a bridge, students may continue to progress in technical recitation while remaining only partially connected to the meaning of the Quran itself.

### **Students’ Difficulties in Applying the Tafahhum Method**

Although the tafahhum method had begun to shape the learning process in meaningful ways, its application was not experienced equally by all students. The field findings show that while many students were able to follow the movement from recitation toward basic understanding, a smaller group continued to struggle when asked to engage the verses more deeply. In the draft findings, 4 out of 30 students, or approximately 13.3 percent, were identified as not yet being able to apply the tafahhum method effectively. This is an important detail because it shows that the challenge did not lie in total resistance to the method, but in the unevenness with which students were able to enter and benefit from it. The difficulty, therefore, was not simply whether tafahhum was introduced, but whether all students were equally ready to respond to its demands.

For the students who encountered difficulty, the problem often appeared when they were asked to move beyond repeating or memorizing verses and begin explaining what those verses meant. Some of them could identify isolated meanings at a very basic level, yet found it difficult to explain the content of a memorized passage in a complete and coherent way. Others struggled to connect one verse with another within a broader thematic sense, so their understanding remained fragmented rather than integrated. This suggests that the challenge of tafahhum did not rest only in vocabulary or recall. It also involved the ability to organize understanding, recognize the inner relationship between verses, and speak about meaning with a degree of clarity that went beyond surface familiarity. One lecturer described this condition by saying,

*“There are students who can memorize and repeat correctly, but when they are asked to explain the meaning, their explanation still breaks apart. They understand a little here and there, but they have not yet been able to connect the verses into one clear understanding.”*

This reflection helps reveal that the difficulty was interpretive in nature, not merely technical.

Another layer of difficulty emerged from the students’ previous educational experiences. The draft indicates that differences in educational background played a significant role in shaping how easily students could engage in tafahhum oriented learning. Those who came with stronger preparation in Arabic and foundational Islamic studies appeared to adapt more quickly, while others needed more time and support before they could approach the verses with confidence. In practice, this meant that the same lesson could be received very differently across students, depending on the depth of their earlier exposure to language and religious knowledge. One lecturer explained this situation in a way that captures the imbalance clearly.

*“Some students have already been trained to look at meaning since before entering campus, so when we ask them to reflect on the verse, they can respond. But others come with a reading habit that is much more focused on sound and memorization, so they need a longer process before they feel ready to speak about meaning.”*

What appears here is not a simple lack of ability, but a difference in learning trajectory that shaped students’ readiness for tafahhum.

Difficulties were also closely related to the students’ limited ability to connect Quranic verses with everyday life. Even when they could grasp part of the general meaning, some students still found it hard to move from literal understanding to contextual awareness. Their responses often remained abstract, brief, or detached from lived experience. This made tafahhum harder to practice in the fuller sense intended by the lecturers, because the method required not only that students know what a verse says, but also that they begin to sense its moral direction and practical relevance. One tahfiz lecturer spoke about this challenge with notable clarity.

*“Sometimes the students can mention the translation or the basic meaning, but when they are asked what the verse means for life, they still hesitate. It shows that understanding has started, but it has not yet become reflection.”*

This distinction is important because it shows that tafahhum was not being reduced to simple translation. It required students to enter a more active encounter with the text, and that step proved difficult for some of them.

The lecturers also observed that students who felt less capable often became more cautious in participatory moments of learning. When the classroom invited discussion, explanation, or reflective response, those with weaker confidence sometimes preferred silence rather than risking an incomplete answer. This hesitancy slowed the growth of tafahhum because the method itself depended on guided engagement, repeated practice, and the willingness to verbalize one’s emerging understanding. One lecturer reflected on this point by saying,

*“There are students who actually want to understand, but when they feel their background is not strong enough, they become afraid of making mistakes. In the end, they listen more than they speak, and that makes the process of building understanding slower.”*

This insight shows that the difficulty of tafahhum cannot be viewed only in cognitive terms. It also touches confidence, participation, and the emotional experience of learning in a setting where understanding must be expressed, not merely kept inwardly.

These difficulties show that the challenge of applying the tafahhum method was multidimensional. It involved limited experience in analyzing Quranic texts, uneven educational preparation, restricted Arabic proficiency, difficulty in linking verses to lived reality, and in some cases a lack of confidence in expressing meaning openly. These factors did not affect all students in the same way, yet they help explain why some students moved more slowly from recitation toward comprehension. This finding is important because it shows that tafahhum should not be presented as a method that works in exactly the same way for every learner. Its promise remains significant, but its success depends on readiness, guidance, and sustained support that respond to the varied backgrounds and capacities students bring into the learning process.

### **Instructional Strategies Used to Strengthen Tafahhum**

In response to the unevenness of students' understanding, the lecturers at the Institut Ilmu Al Quran Jakarta did not leave tafahhum to develop on its own. They approached it as something that had to be cultivated deliberately through repeated guidance, careful scaffolding, and learning practices that could gradually draw students closer to the meaning of the verses they recited. What emerged from the classroom was not a single formula applied rigidly to all students, but a set of instructional efforts shaped by the recognition that students came with different levels of readiness, different educational backgrounds, and different capacities for reflection. Because of that, the strengthening of tafahhum was carried out through strategies that were both pedagogical and relational, combining explanation, repetition, encouragement, and contextual engagement within the daily rhythm of Quranic learning.

One of the most visible strategies was intensive guidance through regular supervised reading and memorization sessions. In these sessions, lecturers did not merely listen to recitation and correct mistakes as they appeared. They also used the moment of guidance to invite students to pause, attend to key words, and consider the basic direction of the verse. This made the learning encounter more than an exercise in accuracy. It became a space where students were slowly trained to see that recitation and understanding should not move separately. One lecturer described this effort by saying,

*“We try not to let the students pass through the verse too quickly. When there is a moment that can open meaning, we stop and guide them little by little, so they do not only read with the tongue but also begin to follow with their understanding.”*

This remark reflects a teaching orientation in which meaning was not treated as an additional burden, but as a dimension of learning that had to be patiently built within the recitational process itself.

Alongside this close guidance, lecturers also sought to strengthen the linguistic foundation that students needed in order to engage the Quran more meaningfully. The draft notes that one important strategy involved reinforcing Arabic language skills and basic knowledge of tafsir through supplementary classes or remedial sessions. This indicates that the lecturers did not reduce students' difficulties to a lack of effort alone. They recognized that understanding Quranic meaning requires a certain degree of linguistic readiness, and that some students needed additional support before they could enter tafahhum with greater confidence. One lecturer explained this with notable clarity.

*“If the students do not have enough support in Arabic, then understanding becomes much harder for them. So in some cases we need to strengthen the foundation first, because tafahhum cannot grow well if the students are still struggling with the most basic language elements.”*

This reveals that the strategy was not simply corrective, but developmental. It sought to build the conditions through which understanding could become more accessible and sustainable.

Another important effort appeared in the use of contextual learning. Rather than leaving the verses at the level of literal recitation or brief translation, lecturers encouraged students to relate them to moral situations, personal conduct, and social realities that felt close to their own lives. This strategy was significant because it helped students experience the Quran not only as a memorized text, but as guidance that speaks to lived reality. In that process, understanding was made more tangible. Students were not only asked what a verse said, but were also invited to consider what it meant in practice, why it mattered, and how it might shape one's way of thinking and acting. A lecturer expressed this orientation by saying,

*“When students begin to see that the verse is connected to something they know in life, their response changes. They become more attentive, and their understanding starts to open because the verse no longer feels distant from them.”*

This shows that contextualization functioned as a bridge between textual familiarity and meaningful engagement, helping students move from remembering words to sensing their relevance.

The strengthening of tafahhum was also supported through collaborative learning and peer interaction. The draft points out that students with stronger tafahhum abilities were encouraged to support their peers, creating a learning atmosphere in which understanding could develop through shared explanation and mutual assistance. This strategy appears especially important in a setting where students do not all progress at the same pace. Through peer support, students who were more hesitant could receive explanation in a more approachable form, while those with stronger understanding could deepen their own learning by articulating meaning to others. One lecturer reflected on this by noting,

*“Sometimes students understand more easily when the explanation comes from a friend who is close to them in learning experience. In that kind of situation, the classroom becomes more open, and students who are usually quiet begin to participate more.”*

What becomes visible here is that tafahhum was not strengthened only through lecturer centered instruction, but also through the creation of a learning community in which comprehension could circulate across students themselves.

These strategies became especially meaningful because they were not applied in isolation. Intensive guidance, language reinforcement, contextual learning, and peer support worked most effectively when they complemented one another. A student who struggled with meaning, for example, might first need closer supervision in recitation, then clearer linguistic explanation, and later a more relatable contextual illustration before beginning to speak about the verse with confidence. The lecturers seemed aware of this layered process. One of them explained,

*“There is no single step that is enough for all students. Some need repetition, some need meaning explained in simple language, and some only begin to understand after discussion. We have to keep opening different paths until the verse becomes clearer to them.”*

This reflection is important because it shows that the strengthening of tafahhum was approached not as a rigid method, but as a pedagogical commitment to meet students where they were and guide them toward a deeper form of literacy.

The effect of these efforts could be seen in the gradual improvement described in the draft, especially among students who had previously struggled to apply tafahhum effectively. Although progress did not occur instantly or uniformly, the presence of sustained instructional support gave students greater opportunity to move beyond memorization and toward comprehension. This suggests that tafahhum was strengthened not by abstract appeals to understand more deeply, but by repeated teaching practices that made understanding more reachable. The lecturers' strategies therefore played a central role in transforming tafahhum from an educational ideal into a practical learning experience. In this setting, the effort to strengthen students' understanding was not peripheral to Qur'anic instruction. It was part of the very work of teaching the Quran in a way that joined recitation, meaning, and moral awareness within a more integrated learning process.

### **Persistent Challenges in the Implementation of Tafahhum**

Even though the lecturers had made deliberate efforts to strengthen students' understanding through intensive guidance, contextual explanation, and collaborative learning, the implementation of tafahhum still encountered challenges that could not be resolved immediately. The learning process showed that the movement from recitation to comprehension was not a simple transition that happened naturally once students were introduced to meaning based instruction. It remained a gradual and often uneven process, shaped by the varied conditions students brought into the classroom. This meant that tafahhum, while pedagogically promising, still had to contend with realities that slowed its development and limited its consistency across learners.

One of the most visible challenges lay in the disparity of students' comprehension levels. Not all students entered the learning process with the same readiness to engage the Quran beyond recitation. Differences in prior educational background influenced how easily they could follow meaning oriented learning. Students who had already been exposed to Arabic, tafsir, or reflective modes of Qur'anic study often adapted more quickly, while others needed a much longer process before they could move comfortably from reading to understanding. A lecturer reflected on this imbalance by saying,

*“In one class we can find students who immediately respond when meaning is discussed, but we also find students who are still trying to hold on to the reading itself. So the gap in readiness is real, and it affects how far they can follow tafahhum in the same lesson.”*

This uneven starting point made it difficult for lecturers to maintain the same depth of engagement for all students at once.

Another challenge emerged in the limited ability of some students to connect the verses with contexts beyond their literal meaning. In many cases, students were able to recognize a basic translation or identify a simple theme, yet their understanding stopped at that point and did not easily develop into reflection. When they were invited to relate the verse to moral situations, personal conduct, or broader social life, their responses often became brief, uncertain, or overly general. This showed that the difficulty was not only linguistic, but also interpretive. A tafhiz lecturer explained,

*“Students may already know what a verse means in a direct sense, but helping them see why the verse matters in life is a different challenge. That step requires a depth of reflection that not all of them are used to.”*

What appears here is a gap between knowing the content of a verse and allowing that content to open into awareness. It was precisely in this space that tafahhum demanded more than surface comprehension.

The implementation of tafahhum was also constrained by the limited availability of intensive practice and sustained guidance. Although lecturers tried to integrate understanding into tahsin, tahfiz, and murojaah sessions, the learning setting did not always allow extended exploration for every student who needed it. Some students required repeated explanation, patient follow up, and additional opportunities to express their developing understanding before they could engage meaningfully with the verse. Yet the rhythm of classroom instruction often had to balance correction, memorization, continuity of reading, and broader learning targets. One lecturer described this limitation in a candid way.

*“We know that some students need more time, more repetition, and more personal guidance before they can really enter the meaning. The challenge is that the learning process has to keep moving, so sometimes the space for deep practice is still not enough for everyone.”*

This remark shows that the challenge did not always arise from lack of pedagogical concern, but from the practical boundaries of instructional time and learning structure.

Students’ motivation and self confidence also shaped the success or difficulty of tafahhum in important ways. The draft notes that students who perceived themselves as less capable often hesitated to participate in discussion, which reduced the effectiveness of peer based learning. This hesitation was not a minor issue, because tafahhum depends on a willingness to engage, ask, respond, and articulate emerging understanding. When students felt insecure about their background or feared making mistakes in front of others, they often chose silence rather than participation. A lecturer expressed this problem with notable sensitivity.

*“Some students are actually trying to understand, but they doubt themselves. They worry that their answer is too simple or not correct, so they stay quiet. When that happens repeatedly, their understanding grows more slowly because they are not fully involved in the process.”*

Tafahhum was in this regard a not merely intellectual challenge. It also entailed the emotional hue of learning, such as assurance, willingness to speak, and courage to interact freely with significance.

These ongoing barriers demonstrate the fact that tafahhum cannot be effectively implemented by explanation. It needs an environment where linguistic preparation, reflective practice, adequate guidance, and emotional support all exist in a long-term manner. The work of the lecturers had already provided significant ways into a more profound Quranic literacy, but the subject also revealed that that way was not always smooth and that it was unstable. It was not that tafahhum did not have relevance. Quite the contrary, its applicability was made all the more clearer by the fact that even students who had difficulty getting past recitation. What the findings expose is that tafahhum implementation should be complemented by long term pedagogical patience, adaptive support and learning conditions that enable the students to develop gradually into an understanding and not to be expected to reach an understanding immediately.

The results of the research indicate that the Quranic literacy of Islamic higher education cannot be perceived as the highest level of being able to recite. Despite the fact that the vast majority of the students in this study were already sufficiently established in terms of their recitational base, in this case, it was not always accompanied by the level of understanding, reflection, and

ethical approach toward the verses they read. This ascertains the fact that Quranic literacy is not a technical accomplishment but a multiple layer education process. In this aspect, the study concurs with the opinion that religious literacy entails the process of building meaning and awareness and not being exposed to sacred text (Hanafi et al., 2022). It is similarly echoed by the larger thesis that Islamic higher education must produce reflective and morally oriented students, rather than students who excel in external performance (Sahin, 2024). What is made evident here is that reading fluency is still crucial yet not as an end goal as far as the bigger objective should be meaningful interaction with the Quran.

This fact is particularly significant when this text is read in conjunction to the research conducted in the recent times that focuses on tajwid, guided reading, and reading fluency. It has been revealed that the structured approaches have the potential to enhance the Quranic reading, as well as increase the technical accuracy, which can be achieved in significant ways (Basir et al., 2024; Nurohmah et al., 2025; Hasibuan et al., 2025). Contributions made by them are not irrelevant since proper recitation is a requisite component of Quranic education. Nevertheless, the current study indicates that a technical mastery and a meaningful understanding may not necessarily develop together in an equal manner. Even confident readers can just not be able to tell what the verse means when the question of its interpretation or connection to the lived experience is raised. This result builds up on the previous research by demonstrating that when the pedagogical focus is devoted to sound, the interpretive aspect is not well developed. In that regard, the present research contributes to the recent anxieties that Qur'anic literacy courses might seem effective institutionally even though they might be deficient in fostering reflective learning (Azhar et al., 2023; Pauzi et al., 2023; Munzir, 2023).

In that context, tafahhum becomes an important pedagogical line of recitation/meaning. The current research has grown to realize that memorizing learning as a form of learning loses its value when the understanding is not regarded as the complement, but as a part of the learning process (Ependi et al., 2023; Rosalinda et al., 2025). This research reinforces that contention by demonstrating that tafahhum is not only helpful in enhancing retention. It is important since it alters the nature of the learning process itself. An obscured verse is at the stage of verbal holding and a verse approached via tafahhum starts to travel into the realms of reflection and morality consciousness. This meaning is also relevant to other issues of the sustainability of memorization in cases where students have no sense of attachment to the content that they are keeping in their memory (Abdullah and Rahim, 2021). Tafahhum was used as the place where recitation started to shift into comprehension in the current research and this is why it gained such significance in the educational system of Quranic learning in IIQ Jakarta.

In the study, it is also revealed that tafahhum may not be relevant to all learners. There were still some students who could not describe the meaning of the memorized verses in a logical way, relate verses based on their theme or link messages of the Quran and real life. These challenges indicate that tafahhum not only relies on the technique, but also on the interpretation willingness of the learner. This aspect aligns with the recent literature, which highlights the value of the contextual meaning and semantic awareness in the Quran interpretation (Rizkilah and Bashori, 2025). It also reinforces the idea that Quranic pedagogy is more effective in the way it allows the learners to be directed to reflection as opposed to repetition only (Hussein et al., 2025; Tantafa et al., 2025). The current paper contributes to the fact that this reflection is not an automatic one. It needs to be constructed with the help of the previous language assistance, with explanation, and with the opportunities of repetition to associate the verse with the lived reality. In this regard, the students who had problems in tafahhum cannot be considered as a sign of the weakness of the methodology, but the sign that the comprehension

is guided by the language, the experience in the earlier education and the trust in the ability to interpret the text.

That is why the instructional strategies determined in the research are worth being considered. The attempt of the lecturers to enhance tafahhüm by providing intensive instructions, contextual explanation, enhancing Arabic skills and peer support indicates that the understanding develops best in a responsive pedagogical environment. This observation is consistent with the existing literature, which reported that teacher efforts and adjustive learning methods are decisive in Islamic education, particularly in cases where the learners belong to diverse backgrounds and preparation degrees (Nor et al., 2024; Utari et al., 2024; Assalihee et al., 2024).. It also upholds recent statements that the Quranic education of the modern setting should be contextual, pedagogically accommodative, and responsive to meaning making instead of fixated on formal transmission (Syaifudi et al., 2025; Bhat & Bisati, 2025). What is effective about the current research is that tafahhüm is only effective when it is introduced as a concept but its fidelity is effected through the continued teaching practices that slowly assist the students to shift their oral familiarity to interpretative awareness.

On a bigger scale, the results imply that tafahhüm ought to be situated within a more general curricular vision of Qur-anic learning. An integrated Islamic curriculum needs to unify recitation, comprehension, reflection and moral application in a consistent manner as opposed to understanding as an appendix once technical reading is established (Moslimany et al., 2024). It is also backed by the results of the research that highlighted the importance of meaningfully engaging with the Quran by creating learning settings that purposefully allow the text to interact with an individual in an active and reflective manner (Yusuff et al., 2021). This is why the current paper recommends that the achievement in Qur'anic education should not be judged merely by the fluency and knowledge on memorization, but also by the fact that the learner is gaining the ability to decode the message of the verses and appreciate them in relation to life. That way, the transition between letters and meaning is not merely a pedagogical motto. It refers to the key educational task of the institutions that make the Quran the core of academic and spiritual education.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that Quranic literacy among students in the Institut Ilmu Al Quran Jakarta has overall grown well in the level of recitation, but it has not been equally commensurated by equal level of profundity in understanding and reflection of the meaning of the verses. The implication of the findings is that the tafahhüm method is instrumental in closing this gap and assisting the students in stepping out of the memorization and fluent reading into a more meaningful interpretation of the Quran. Simultaneously, its application is still influenced by the variations in the Arabic level, educational attainment, interpretative preparedness, and trustworthiness in the application of the Quranic messages to daily life. That is why the reinforcement of Quranic literacy in Islamic higher education cannot be done through recitation based learning only but should be supplemented with continued pedagogical instructions, contextual interpretations, language reinforcements, and collaborative learning in such a way that students can not only read and memorize Quran but to be able to use it as a source of meaning, reflection, and moral development.

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