



# Efforts to Improve Elementary School Students' Conceptual Understanding in Islamic Education Learning by Implementing Role Playing Models

Hudia<sup>1</sup>, SD Negeri Grong-Grong, Pidie, Indonesia

Abubakar<sup>2</sup>, SD Negeri Grong-Grong, Pidie, Indonesia

## ABSTRACT

This study aims to improve elementary school students' conceptual understanding of Islamic education by implementing the role-playing model. This study is a classroom action research with the Kemmis & Mc Taggart model with four steps in each cycle: planning, action, observation, and reflection. The subjects of this study were fifth-grade students of Grong-Grong Pidie Elementary School. The research data were collected using observation and test techniques. Observation was used to obtain data on teacher and student learning activities, while tests were used to measure students' conceptual understanding of Islamic education. The collected data were then analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. The results of the study indicate that the role-playing model can improve students' conceptual understanding of Islamic education in elementary schools. This is evident from the results of the analysis of the research data which show that the percentage of student completion experienced a significant increase in each cycle with details of 63.17% in the pre-cycle, then increased in cycle 1 to 78.24% and in cycle 2 to 86.17%. The average value achieved also increased with details of pre-cycle 70.19, cycle 1 obtained 82.33 and cycle 2 obtained 89.47. Furthermore, the results of the standard deviation test also showed that the standard deviation value in each cycle was getting smaller, meaning that the students' conceptual understanding ability was more evenly distributed. Based on these results, the role playing model can be used as an alternative learning model that can be used to overcome the low conceptual understanding ability of students in Islamic education learning in elementary schools.

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## Corresponding Author:

**Hudia**

SD Negeri Grong-Grong, Pidie, Indonesia

hudia2314@gmail.com

## Introduction

Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools plays a fundamental role in shaping students' spiritual awareness, moral character, and social responsibility from an early age. In many Muslim-majority contexts, Islamic education is not merely positioned as a

subject for transmitting doctrinal knowledge, but also as an educational foundation that cultivates values, attitudes, and daily religious practices. At the primary level, Islamic learning is expected to contribute to the development of students' identity and behavior in accordance with Islamic principles, while simultaneously strengthening their cognitive understanding of religious concepts. Therefore, Islamic education must be designed not only to deliver content, but also to ensure that students meaningfully comprehend the concepts being taught (Huda, 2019; Rahman, 2020).

Conceptual understanding is one of the most essential learning outcomes in religious education because it enables students to internalize Islamic teachings beyond memorization. Students who possess strong conceptual understanding are able to explain religious ideas using their own words, relate Islamic principles to real-life contexts, and apply them in everyday decision-making. In contrast, students who only rely on rote memorization may appear successful in recalling definitions, but they often fail to connect Islamic teachings with ethical reasoning and personal conduct. This condition creates a gap between knowledge and practice, which is a critical concern in Islamic Religious Education (Sahin, 2018; Zainuddin & Perera, 2019).

In elementary Islamic education, students are commonly introduced to concepts such as faith, worship, moral behavior, and Islamic history. These concepts are often abstract and require deep cognitive engagement to be properly understood. For instance, the concept of sincerity in worship, the meaning of honesty, or the values of patience and gratitude cannot be effectively grasped through memorization alone. Such concepts demand learning strategies that encourage interpretation, reflection, and contextualization. Without appropriate instructional approaches, students may develop superficial comprehension that does not support long-term religious development (Halstead, 2004; Nasr, 2019).

Despite the importance of conceptual understanding, learning practices in many elementary classrooms still emphasize teacher-centered instruction. Traditional approaches often rely on lecturing, textbook reading, and question-and-answer sessions that focus primarily on factual recall. While these strategies may support basic knowledge acquisition, they frequently fail to promote meaningful understanding. In Islamic education, such methods can reduce learning into mechanical repetition of religious terms and practices, limiting students' ability to critically process and internalize Islamic values (Al-Attas, 1999; Boyle, 2006).

The dominance of conventional instruction may be influenced by multiple factors, including limited teacher training in innovative pedagogy, restricted learning resources, and the perception that religious learning must be delivered in rigid forms. In some cases, teachers may prioritize finishing curriculum content over ensuring students' understanding. This issue becomes increasingly problematic when students are

evaluated using written tests that measure memorization rather than comprehension. Consequently, students may achieve passing scores but remain unable to articulate Islamic concepts clearly and coherently (Lubis & Aziz, 2021; Saada, 2020).

In the context of 21st-century education, the emphasis on conceptual understanding is strongly aligned with the demand for critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. Religious education, including Islamic education, is also expected to contribute to these competencies by encouraging students to think reflectively and ethically. Therefore, instructional models that foster active participation and meaningful engagement are essential for enhancing students' learning outcomes. Active learning approaches have been widely recommended as effective strategies for improving conceptual understanding across disciplines (Prince, 2004; Freeman et al., 2014).

Active learning is particularly relevant for elementary students, who tend to learn more effectively when they are involved in interactive experiences. Children at the primary school level generally have strong curiosity, imagination, and emotional sensitivity. These characteristics make them responsive to learning activities that involve exploration, role enactment, and collaborative engagement. Learning models that provide opportunities for students to participate actively can help them construct meaning and connect new knowledge to prior experiences. This aligns with constructivist learning theory, which views knowledge as actively built through interaction and reflection rather than passively received (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978).

Constructivist perspectives emphasize that conceptual understanding emerges when students are allowed to engage with learning content in authentic ways. Students need opportunities to experience learning situations that resemble real contexts in order to make sense of abstract concepts. In Islamic education, this means that students must be guided to see how Islamic teachings function in real social life, such as honesty in daily interactions, responsibility in school duties, and respect toward parents and teachers. When Islamic concepts are taught only as definitions, students may fail to perceive their relevance. Therefore, learning must be contextual, experiential, and student-centered (Bruner, 1966; Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

One instructional model that is considered capable of strengthening experiential learning is role playing. Role playing is a learning strategy that allows students to act out specific roles in simulated situations, enabling them to experience learning content through performance and interaction. This model supports emotional engagement, social communication, and cognitive processing simultaneously. In educational practice, role playing is frequently used to enhance students' understanding of values, social norms, and ethical decision-making. Through role enactment, students can explore

perspectives and develop deeper insight into moral concepts (Joyner & Young, 2006; Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997).

Role playing has been widely acknowledged as an effective approach for teaching value-based education, including moral and religious learning. The model provides students with opportunities to practice applying values in realistic scenarios, rather than simply hearing about them. In Islamic education, this approach is highly relevant because many Islamic teachings involve behavior, ethics, and interpersonal responsibility. For example, students can role-play scenarios about helping others, practicing honesty, respecting elders, or performing religious obligations. Such enactments encourage students to understand the meaning behind the teachings, not merely memorize the rules (Kamaluddin, 2020; Rabi'ah & Ismail, 2021).

The effectiveness of role playing is also supported by social learning theory, which explains that children learn behaviors and values through observation, imitation, and interaction with their environment. When students observe peers demonstrating appropriate actions in a role-play scenario, they are more likely to internalize those behaviors. Furthermore, role playing encourages feedback and discussion, which strengthens reflective thinking and reinforces conceptual understanding. This theoretical foundation suggests that role playing can serve as an instructional bridge between cognitive learning and behavioral development (Bandura, 1977; Schunk, 2012).

In addition, role playing is closely related to experiential learning theory, which highlights that learning occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. By engaging in role playing, students gain concrete experiences of applying Islamic concepts. They then reflect on the experience through discussion and teacher guidance, leading to deeper conceptualization. Finally, students may apply the learned values in real life. This cycle demonstrates that role playing can effectively foster meaningful learning outcomes, particularly in concept-based instruction (Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004).

Several empirical studies in educational contexts have demonstrated that role playing contributes positively to students' conceptual understanding and learning motivation. Role playing is reported to enhance students' engagement and participation, which are critical factors in improving learning achievement. Students tend to show higher enthusiasm when learning activities involve interaction and creativity. Moreover, role playing promotes collaborative learning, allowing students to learn from each other through communication and peer support. Such learning environments are associated with improved comprehension and retention of learning content (Gillies, 2016; Slavin, 2014).

In the domain of religious education, interactive models such as role playing have been found to strengthen students' moral reasoning and religious awareness. Studies

indicate that students who learn religious values through participatory methods demonstrate better ability to interpret moral issues and connect them with religious teachings. Role playing encourages students to evaluate situations and respond based on value frameworks, which enhances their understanding of religious concepts in practical terms. Therefore, role playing is not only a pedagogical technique but also a medium for value internalization (Lickona, 1991; Nucci, 2001).

However, despite its potential benefits, role playing is not always implemented effectively in elementary classrooms. Some teachers may lack confidence in organizing interactive learning activities, while others may assume that role playing is time-consuming and difficult to manage. Classroom conditions such as limited time allocation, large student numbers, and varying student abilities may also present challenges. As a result, many Islamic education teachers continue to rely on conventional methods even though they may not optimally support conceptual understanding (Fahmi & Mahmud, 2020; Yusuf & Rahmat, 2022).

In Indonesia, Islamic Religious Education is part of the national curriculum and is taught systematically at all levels of schooling. Nevertheless, there are ongoing concerns regarding the effectiveness of its instructional implementation. Many students demonstrate limited conceptual understanding of Islamic teachings, particularly when they are required to explain religious concepts using reasoning and contextual interpretation. This issue is often observed in elementary schools, where students may struggle to differentiate between religious terms, understand moral principles, or describe the purpose of worship practices. These challenges highlight the need for innovative learning strategies that promote deeper comprehension (Azra, 2017; Muhaimin, 2015).

The problem of low conceptual understanding is also closely related to students' learning outcomes, particularly their performance in assessments. When students do not understand concepts deeply, they may fail to answer analytical questions, apply teachings in situational problems, or express religious understanding in coherent explanations. In Islamic education, assessment should ideally measure both cognitive comprehension and the ability to apply values. Therefore, improving conceptual understanding becomes a crucial priority to ensure that learning outcomes reflect meaningful mastery rather than surface-level memorization (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Brookhart, 2010).

The present study is situated within the framework of classroom action research, which is widely used to improve teaching practices and student learning outcomes through reflective cycles. Classroom action research enables teachers and researchers to identify classroom problems, implement interventions, observe the results, and reflect for improvement in subsequent cycles. The Kemmis and McTaggart model,

consisting of planning, action, observation, and reflection, is particularly suitable for investigating instructional interventions because it provides systematic procedures for continuous improvement. This approach is relevant for exploring the effectiveness of role playing in enhancing conceptual understanding in Islamic education (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Mills, 2018).

In the context of SD Negeri Grong-Grong Pidie, preliminary observation indicated that students' conceptual understanding in Islamic education was still relatively low. Students tended to experience difficulty when asked to explain religious concepts, describe moral values in their own words, or relate Islamic teachings to everyday situations. This condition suggests that the learning process required improvement, particularly in instructional strategies that promote active engagement. Such classroom conditions provide a strong rationale for applying role playing as an alternative learning model to address the identified learning problem (Creswell, 2014; Sugiyono, 2019).

Role playing was selected in this study because it aligns with the characteristics of elementary learners and the nature of Islamic education content. Elementary students generally enjoy learning activities involving imagination and performance, and role playing provides a structured way to channel these tendencies into meaningful learning. Furthermore, Islamic education contains numerous moral and behavioral themes that can be simulated through role enactment. By acting out scenarios related to Islamic values, students can develop deeper understanding through direct experience and guided reflection (Arends, 2012; Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2015).

This study also emphasizes that improving conceptual understanding is not only reflected in increasing average test scores but also in reducing disparities among students. When conceptual understanding improves, students' achievement tends to become more evenly distributed because learning is no longer dominated by a small group of high-performing students. Active learning strategies such as role playing may provide opportunities for all students to participate, express their ideas, and develop comprehension through social interaction. Therefore, role playing is expected to contribute not only to achievement improvement but also to learning equity within the classroom (Hattie, 2009; Tomlinson, 2014).

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine the implementation of the role playing model as an instructional intervention to enhance fifth-grade students' conceptual understanding in Islamic Religious Education. The study is expected to provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of role playing in improving student learning outcomes, particularly in the domain of concept mastery. Moreover, the findings may contribute to the development of pedagogical recommendations for Islamic education teachers, especially in elementary schools, to adopt more interactive

and meaningful learning approaches (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2019; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both theoretical and practical dimensions. Theoretically, it strengthens the discussion on the relevance of experiential and constructivist learning models for Islamic education. Practically, it provides a classroom-based solution that can be replicated by teachers facing similar learning problems. This research also supports the broader agenda of improving the quality of Islamic Religious Education through innovative pedagogy that fosters meaningful understanding, character development, and active student engagement. Thus, implementing role playing is positioned not merely as a teaching technique but as a strategic effort to improve Islamic education outcomes in primary schools (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Fullan, 2016).

This study is grounded in the belief that Islamic Religious Education must be taught through approaches that enable students to understand, internalize, and practice Islamic teachings in real life. Conceptual understanding is an essential foundation for ensuring that religious knowledge transforms into religious awareness and moral conduct. By implementing the role playing model, this research seeks to demonstrate that active learning can effectively enhance students' conceptual mastery and create a more engaging and meaningful Islamic learning environment. Therefore, the results of this study are expected to strengthen the pedagogical orientation of Islamic education toward deeper understanding and practical relevance (Guskey, 2002; Wiliam, 2011).

## Methods

This study employed a classroom action research design aimed at improving students' conceptual understanding in Islamic Religious Education through the implementation of the role playing learning model. Classroom action research was selected because it provides a systematic framework for identifying instructional problems in real classroom contexts, implementing improvements through planned interventions, and evaluating the effectiveness of these interventions through iterative cycles of reflection and revision. This design is appropriate for studies that focus on enhancing teaching practices and student learning outcomes in authentic educational settings. The research procedure was based on the cyclical action research model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart, which consists of four interconnected stages, namely planning, action, observation, and reflection implemented continuously across research cycles (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

The research was conducted at SD Negeri Grong-Grong Pidie, an elementary school located in Pidie Regency, Aceh Province, Indonesia. This setting was selected based on preliminary observations and discussions with the classroom teacher indicating that students' conceptual understanding in Islamic Religious Education was

still below the expected standard. The learning process in the classroom was generally dominated by conventional teaching methods, and students tended to demonstrate difficulties in explaining key Islamic concepts, interpreting moral teachings, and applying religious values in contextual problem situations. Therefore, this school was considered relevant and appropriate for implementing a pedagogical intervention through classroom action research.

The participants of this study were all students of Grade V at SD Negeri Grong-Grong Pidie during the academic year in which the research was conducted. The entire class was involved to ensure that the intervention could be applied naturally within the actual learning environment and to avoid sampling bias. Grade V students were selected because, at this developmental stage, they are expected to demonstrate higher cognitive abilities, including the capacity to reason, analyze moral situations, and articulate conceptual explanations. Additionally, the Islamic Religious Education curriculum at this grade level includes conceptual materials that require deeper understanding and reflective thinking, making the class suitable for the implementation of role playing strategies.

The focus of the study was students' conceptual understanding in Islamic Religious Education learning. Conceptual understanding in this study refers to students' ability to comprehend Islamic concepts meaningfully, explain the material using their own language, identify relationships among concepts, and apply these concepts to daily life situations. This definition aligns with educational perspectives emphasizing that conceptual understanding is demonstrated when learners can interpret, classify, exemplify, summarize, infer, compare, and explain knowledge beyond memorization (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In the context of Islamic education, conceptual understanding also involves students' ability to connect Islamic teachings with ethical reasoning and behavior in everyday contexts (Halstead, 2004).

This research was conducted in two cycles preceded by a pre-cycle stage. The pre-cycle stage was carried out to identify the baseline condition of students' conceptual understanding and to diagnose the main instructional problems that occurred during the learning process. The pre-cycle results were then used as the basis for developing the intervention plan for Cycle I. Each cycle in this study followed the Kemmis and McTaggart framework consisting of planning, action, observation, and reflection stages, and each stage was implemented systematically to ensure methodological rigor and scientific accountability (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Mills, 2018).

During the planning stage of Cycle I, the researcher collaborated with the classroom teacher to prepare all instructional components required for implementing the role playing model. This preparation included developing a lesson plan aligned with the national curriculum, identifying learning objectives based on the targeted Islamic

Religious Education material, preparing learning scenarios suitable for role playing activities, designing student worksheets, and preparing assessment instruments. The role playing scenarios were structured to reflect real-life situations related to Islamic values and concepts, allowing students to explore the meaning of the material through simulated interaction. In addition, observation sheets for teacher activity and student activity were designed to ensure systematic documentation of the teaching-learning process.

The learning material selected for this research was determined based on the Grade V Islamic Religious Education syllabus and was chosen because it contained conceptual elements requiring students to understand values and apply them in practical situations. The learning content was specifically focused on Islamic moral teachings that are relevant to students' daily lives, such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and cooperation. These themes were considered appropriate for role playing because they involve social behavior and ethical decision-making, which can be effectively simulated through enactment and discussion. The selection of this content was also based on the assumption that Islamic values are more effectively understood when students are engaged in experiential learning processes rather than passive listening (Kolb, 1984; Lickona, 1991).

The action stage in Cycle I was implemented through classroom learning activities using the role playing model. The role playing procedures were designed according to active learning principles and were conducted in several systematic phases. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher conducted an introduction session, including greeting, motivation, and apperception activities to connect students' prior knowledge with the new learning topic. The teacher then explained the learning objectives and introduced the concept of role playing to ensure that students understood the learning model and were prepared to participate. This introduction was important because students were not previously familiar with structured role playing activities as part of formal Islamic education lessons.

After the introduction, the teacher delivered a brief conceptual explanation of the learning topic to provide students with initial understanding. This step was conducted to ensure that students had a foundational knowledge framework before entering the simulation activity. The teacher then divided students into small groups, and each group was assigned a specific role playing scenario. Group formation was arranged heterogeneously to ensure balanced distribution of student ability levels and to promote collaborative learning. Heterogeneous grouping is widely recognized as an effective strategy for enhancing peer learning and increasing participation among students with varying academic abilities (Slavin, 2014; Gillies, 2016).

Each group was provided with written role descriptions and scenario outlines prepared by the researcher and teacher. The scenarios were designed to represent situations that could realistically occur in students' daily school or home life. For example, scenarios included situations where students needed to demonstrate honesty, help a friend, show responsibility in completing tasks, or resolve interpersonal conflict using Islamic moral principles. Students were given time to read the scenario, discuss their understanding of the roles, and rehearse their performance. During this preparation stage, the teacher acted as a facilitator by guiding discussion, clarifying misunderstandings, and ensuring that all group members were actively involved.

The role playing performance stage was carried out after students completed their preparation. Each group performed their role play in front of the class while other students observed. The teacher ensured that classroom conditions remained conducive and that students paid attention respectfully. During the performances, the teacher and researcher observed student behavior, participation, communication skills, and how well the enacted roles reflected the Islamic concepts being learned. Observation during this stage was essential because it provided qualitative evidence of student engagement and conceptual application.

Following each performance, a structured discussion session was conducted. The teacher facilitated classroom reflection by asking students to interpret the meaning of the role play, identify the Islamic concepts represented, and explain the moral values demonstrated by the characters. Students were encouraged to express their opinions and provide feedback regarding the scenario. This reflective discussion was considered a crucial component of the role playing model because it enabled students to connect their experience to conceptual understanding. Reflection is a key element in experiential learning that transforms concrete experience into abstract conceptualization (Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004).

At the end of the lesson, the teacher provided reinforcement by summarizing the key Islamic concepts discussed and linking them explicitly to Qur'anic teachings or prophetic traditions relevant to the topic. The teacher then provided a short evaluation activity to check students' immediate understanding. The evaluation was followed by a closing session that included moral messages and encouragement for students to apply the learned values in their daily lives. This closing stage was intended to strengthen the internalization of concepts and to emphasize that Islamic education is oriented toward practical moral development.

The observation stage was conducted simultaneously with the implementation of learning activities in each cycle. Observations were carried out by the researcher and supported by the classroom teacher to ensure objectivity and accuracy. The observation focused on two major aspects, namely teacher activity and student activity during the

learning process. Teacher activity observation included indicators such as lesson opening, clarity of explanation, ability to manage role playing procedures, facilitation of discussion, classroom management, time management, and reinforcement strategies. Student activity observation included indicators such as attentiveness, participation in group discussion, willingness to perform roles, cooperation, ability to express ideas during reflection, and responsiveness to teacher guidance.

To ensure systematic data recording, observation instruments were structured in the form of rating-scale observation sheets. Each indicator was scored based on predetermined criteria ranging from low to high performance. The use of structured observation instruments is essential in classroom action research to minimize subjectivity and to ensure that classroom dynamics can be analyzed quantitatively through descriptive statistical procedures (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018; Creswell, 2014). The observation results were then converted into percentages to provide a clearer interpretation of improvement across cycles.

The reflection stage was conducted after the completion of Cycle I and Cycle II. Reflection involved analyzing observation results, evaluating student test scores, and identifying strengths and weaknesses in the learning process. The researcher and classroom teacher collaboratively discussed challenges that occurred during the implementation, such as student hesitation in performing roles, limited time for discussion, or uneven participation among group members. Based on these reflections, improvements were designed for the subsequent cycle. This reflective process is central to the action research model because it ensures that instructional interventions are continuously refined based on evidence gathered during implementation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Stringer, 2014).

In Cycle II, the planning stage was improved based on Cycle I reflection results. Revisions included simplifying scenario instructions, increasing teacher guidance during group preparation, assigning clearer role divisions within each group, and improving classroom management strategies to ensure that all students actively participated. Additional motivational strategies were also prepared to reduce student anxiety and increase confidence during role play performances. The teacher also prepared more structured guiding questions for post-performance discussion to deepen conceptual exploration and ensure that students' reflection was directed toward the intended Islamic learning objectives.

The action stage in Cycle II followed the same general role playing procedures as Cycle I but with improved implementation quality. Students were provided with clearer instructions and more time allocation was optimized to ensure that group discussions and reflective sessions were conducted effectively. The teacher also ensured that all students had opportunities to participate actively, either as performers, observers, or

discussants. Classroom interaction was enhanced through reinforcement strategies such as appreciation for group performances and encouragement for quieter students to share their perspectives.

Data in this study were collected using two primary techniques, namely observation and testing. Observation was used to obtain data related to the learning process, including teacher instructional performance and student learning activities during the implementation of role playing. Testing was used to measure the level of students' conceptual understanding before and after the intervention. The combination of observation and test data is considered appropriate for classroom action research because it provides both process-oriented evidence and outcome-oriented evidence of instructional improvement (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2019).

The conceptual understanding test was developed in accordance with the learning objectives and the Islamic Religious Education material taught in each cycle. The test consisted of structured questions that measured students' ability to explain concepts, interpret moral situations, provide examples, and apply Islamic teachings in daily contexts. The test items were designed based on the cognitive dimension of understanding in Bloom's revised taxonomy, including interpretation, exemplification, classification, summarization, inference, comparison, and explanation (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The test was administered in three phases, namely pre-cycle testing, post-test Cycle I, and post-test Cycle II.

To ensure content validity, the test instrument was reviewed collaboratively by the researcher and the classroom teacher. The items were examined to ensure alignment with the curriculum, suitability for Grade V student cognitive development, and relevance to Islamic moral concepts. The observation sheets were also validated through expert judgment to ensure that the indicators accurately represented teacher and student activity constructs. This validation process was essential to strengthen the credibility and scientific quality of the research instruments (Creswell, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018).

The primary quantitative data in this study consisted of student test scores. These scores were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including calculation of mean scores, percentage of mastery learning, and standard deviation. The mean score was used to describe the overall improvement of student achievement across cycles. Mastery learning percentage was calculated by identifying the number of students who achieved the minimum mastery criterion established by the school. The minimum mastery criterion for Islamic Religious Education in this class was determined based on the school's academic policy, and students were categorized as successful if they met or exceeded the required score.

Standard deviation was calculated to examine the distribution of student achievement and to determine whether learning outcomes became more evenly distributed across the class. A decreasing standard deviation indicates that student scores become less dispersed, suggesting that the intervention contributed to more equitable learning outcomes. This analysis is important because effective learning improvement should not only increase average achievement but also reduce learning gaps among students (Field, 2018; Pallant, 2020).

In addition, qualitative data obtained from observation were analyzed descriptively by interpreting classroom interaction patterns, student participation levels, and teacher instructional practices. These qualitative findings were used to complement quantitative test results and to provide deeper explanations of why improvements occurred. This approach is consistent with the principle of triangulation, which strengthens research credibility by integrating multiple sources of evidence to confirm findings (Denzin, 2012; Patton, 2015).

The criteria of success in this research were determined based on both process and outcome indicators. From the outcome perspective, the intervention was considered successful if the percentage of students achieving mastery learning increased significantly from the pre-cycle stage and reached at least the expected classroom mastery standard. From the process perspective, the intervention was considered successful if observation results showed that teacher performance and student activity reached the good or very good category, indicating that the learning process was implemented effectively. Establishing success criteria is essential in classroom action research because it provides clear benchmarks for evaluating whether instructional improvement goals have been achieved (Mills, 2018; Stringer, 2014).

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the school administration and the classroom teacher. Students were informed that the learning activities were part of classroom improvement efforts and that their participation was intended to support better learning outcomes. Confidentiality was maintained by presenting research findings in aggregate form without disclosing individual student identities. Ethical compliance in educational research is necessary to protect participants and to ensure that the research process aligns with academic integrity standards (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018; Creswell, 2014).

The methodological framework of this study was designed to ensure rigorous implementation of classroom action research procedures and to provide strong empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of the role playing model in improving students' conceptual understanding in Islamic Religious Education. The combination of cyclical intervention, structured observation, validated testing instruments, and

descriptive statistical analysis ensured that the research findings could be scientifically justified and systematically interpreted. Through this methodological approach, the study aimed to produce results that are not only practically relevant for classroom improvement but also academically significant for broader scholarly discussion on innovative pedagogy in Islamic elementary education.

## Result

This section presents the findings of the classroom action research conducted in Grade V of SD Negeri Grong-Grong Pidie regarding the implementation of the role playing model to improve students' conceptual understanding in Islamic Religious Education. The results are organized based on the stages of the research, namely the pre-cycle condition, Cycle I, and Cycle II. The quantitative data are derived from students' conceptual understanding test scores, while the supporting qualitative data are derived from classroom observation of teacher activity and student learning participation during the implementation of the intervention.

The baseline findings in the pre-cycle stage indicated that students' conceptual understanding was still relatively low. Learning activities tended to be teacher-centered, with limited student engagement and minimal interactive learning experiences. Students showed difficulties in explaining Islamic concepts using their own words, relating the concepts to daily life situations, and providing appropriate examples of Islamic moral values. The pre-cycle test confirmed that student achievement had not reached the expected mastery level. The distribution of scores also showed that student performance was uneven, meaning that conceptual understanding was not equally achieved across the class.

After the implementation of the role playing model in Cycle I, a notable improvement was observed. Students became more engaged in the learning process, demonstrated higher participation during group discussions, and appeared more confident when explaining moral concepts through the scenarios performed. Although some students still hesitated to actively participate in the role play performance stage, the overall classroom atmosphere shifted toward more active learning. The improvement was reflected in the increased percentage of mastery learning and higher mean score compared to the pre-cycle stage.

Further improvement occurred in Cycle II. The revision of teaching strategies based on Cycle I reflection contributed significantly to better classroom management and student participation. Students were more prepared and confident in performing their roles, group cooperation was more effective, and classroom discussions became more meaningful. Students increasingly demonstrated the ability to interpret Islamic concepts, relate them to contextual situations, and justify their answers using moral reasoning aligned with Islamic teachings. This improvement was also reflected in the quantitative

outcomes, including increased mastery learning percentage, higher mean scores, and reduced standard deviation, indicating that student achievement became more evenly distributed. To provide a clearer presentation of the quantitative findings, the results of students' conceptual understanding tests across the three stages are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Students' Conceptual Understanding Achievement Across Research Stages

Research Stage	Mean Score	Mastery Learning Percentage (%)
Pre-Cycle	70.19	63.17%
Cycle I	82.33	78.24%
Cycle II	89.47	86.17%

The data presented in Table 1 demonstrate that the implementation of role playing produced a consistent increase in student learning outcomes. In the pre-cycle stage, the mean score was 70.19, and only 63.17% of students achieved mastery learning. This indicates that more than one-third of the class had not yet developed sufficient conceptual understanding according to the predetermined minimum mastery criterion. After the intervention was introduced in Cycle I, the mean score increased to 82.33, and mastery learning improved to 78.24%. This improvement indicates that the role playing model was able to significantly enhance student achievement after only one cycle of implementation.

The most substantial results were found in Cycle II. The mean score increased further to 89.47, and mastery learning percentage reached 86.17%. This indicates that the majority of students were able to reach the expected conceptual mastery. The increase from 78.24% in Cycle I to 86.17% in Cycle II confirms that the revised role playing implementation was more effective and better aligned with students' learning needs. This result also suggests that the role playing model requires continuous refinement through reflective practice in order to achieve optimal outcomes.

The improvement of learning outcomes can also be observed from the progression of mastery learning percentages across stages. The increase from 63.17% in the pre-cycle to 78.24% in Cycle I represents an improvement of 15.07 percentage points. Furthermore, the increase from Cycle I to Cycle II represents an additional improvement of 7.93 percentage points. Overall, the mastery learning percentage improved by 23.00 percentage points from the baseline condition to the final cycle. This indicates that role playing contributed to a meaningful improvement in conceptual understanding achievement in Islamic Religious Education.

In addition to mean scores and mastery learning percentages, the analysis of score distribution also demonstrated improvement. The standard deviation of student scores decreased across cycles, indicating that student performance became more evenly

distributed. In the pre-cycle stage, the standard deviation was relatively high, suggesting that only a limited number of students achieved high understanding while many students struggled. In Cycle I, the standard deviation decreased, indicating that the intervention helped reduce the learning gap. In Cycle II, the standard deviation became even smaller, meaning that the majority of students improved and reached similar achievement levels. This finding suggests that the role playing model not only improved average learning outcomes but also promoted learning equity across students.

The decreasing standard deviation supports the conclusion that role playing was effective in helping weaker students catch up with higher-performing peers. Through group-based learning and interactive performance, students who initially struggled were able to learn from peer modeling, collaborative discussion, and teacher facilitation. This condition created an inclusive learning environment where students were encouraged to participate regardless of their initial academic level. Thus, the intervention not only increased achievement but also strengthened classroom learning dynamics and reduced performance disparity.

The qualitative observation results further support the quantitative findings. During the pre-cycle stage, student activity was limited, and only a small number of students actively responded to teacher questions. Many students appeared passive, and classroom discussion was dominated by the teacher. In Cycle I, student activity increased significantly. Students became more willing to participate in group discussion, and several students demonstrated enthusiasm in acting out scenarios. However, some students were still hesitant to speak during reflection sessions. In Cycle II, the classroom atmosphere became more interactive. Students showed greater confidence in performing roles and actively engaged in post-performance discussions. This improvement suggests that role playing contributed positively to both the learning process and learning outcomes.

The results of this study demonstrate that the role playing learning model was effective in improving students' conceptual understanding in Islamic Religious Education. The consistent improvement in mean scores, mastery learning percentages, and score distribution across cycles provides strong evidence that the intervention successfully addressed the learning problem identified in the pre-cycle stage.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this classroom action research indicate that the implementation of the role playing model significantly improved Grade V students' conceptual understanding in Islamic Religious Education. The improvement was evident in both quantitative indicators, including increased mean scores and mastery learning percentages, and qualitative indicators, including enhanced student participation, stronger learning engagement, and more meaningful classroom interaction. These results confirm that

role playing can serve as an effective instructional approach for strengthening conceptual learning in Islamic education, particularly at the elementary school level.

The increase in mean scores from 70.19 in the pre-cycle stage to 82.33 in Cycle I demonstrates that role playing facilitated substantial learning improvement after the first cycle of implementation. This finding suggests that role playing is capable of transforming the learning environment from passive reception of knowledge into active construction of understanding. Such improvement aligns with constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that students develop stronger conceptual understanding when they actively engage with learning material through experience, interaction, and reflection (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, role playing created opportunities for students to experience Islamic moral concepts in simulated real-life situations, enabling them to interpret meaning more effectively than through traditional lecture-based instruction.

The further improvement in Cycle II, where the mean score increased to 89.47 and mastery learning reached 86.17%, indicates that the role playing model becomes more effective when refined through reflection and revision. This supports the principle of classroom action research, which emphasizes cyclical improvement through continuous evaluation of instructional practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Mills, 2018). The revisions made in Cycle II, such as clearer role distribution, improved teacher facilitation, and better structured reflection questions, contributed to a more effective implementation of the learning model. This finding confirms that innovative learning strategies require adaptive teaching practices and continuous refinement to meet students' needs and classroom conditions.

The increase in mastery learning percentage from 63.17% in the pre-cycle stage to 78.24% in Cycle I and 86.17% in Cycle II reflects a significant improvement in students' ability to achieve the expected learning standards. This indicates that role playing was not only effective for high-performing students but also supported students who initially struggled with conceptual understanding. This result is consistent with research indicating that active learning strategies tend to produce higher learning achievement because they encourage student engagement and deeper cognitive processing (Freeman et al., 2014; Prince, 2004). Role playing allows students to process information through multiple learning dimensions, including verbal explanation, social interaction, and emotional involvement, which enhances comprehension and retention.

The improvement in student achievement can also be explained through experiential learning theory. Kolb (1984) emphasized that meaningful learning occurs when students engage in a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In this study, role playing provided students with concrete experiences by allowing them to enact moral scenarios reflecting

Islamic values. After the performances, students participated in reflective discussions guided by the teacher. Through these reflections, students developed abstract conceptualization regarding the Islamic concepts being studied. Finally, the learning process encouraged students to apply these values in daily life contexts, representing active experimentation. This experiential cycle strengthened students' conceptual mastery because they did not only learn what Islamic values are, but also experienced how they are practiced.

The observation results also demonstrated that students became more confident and active across cycles. In Cycle I, some students were hesitant to perform roles and express ideas, but they gradually became more comfortable. By Cycle II, students demonstrated stronger confidence, better cooperation, and more active participation in classroom discussions. This finding supports the argument that role playing fosters a supportive learning environment where students can develop communication skills and self-confidence. Joyner and Young (2006) noted that role playing is effective for promoting student interaction and communication because it requires learners to articulate ideas through performance and dialogue. In Islamic education, this is particularly important because conceptual understanding is closely related to students' ability to explain moral teachings and justify ethical decisions.

The effectiveness of role playing in this study is also strongly connected to social learning theory. Bandura (1977) explained that learning occurs through observation and modeling, where individuals adopt behaviors and concepts by observing others. During the role play performances, students observed their peers demonstrating Islamic moral behaviors such as honesty, responsibility, and cooperation. These observed behaviors served as models that reinforced students' understanding of how Islamic values should be applied. Furthermore, peer discussion after performances enabled students to clarify misunderstandings and strengthen their conceptual comprehension. This process supports the conclusion that role playing is effective because it provides social modeling and reinforcement, which are key mechanisms in student learning development (Schunk, 2012).

The decreasing standard deviation across cycles provides an important additional contribution to the discussion. While the increase in mean scores demonstrates improved overall achievement, the reduction in score variability indicates that learning improvement occurred more evenly across the class. This suggests that role playing supported not only academically strong students but also students with lower initial performance. Such findings are significant because one of the major challenges in elementary classrooms is the learning gap among students. Tomlinson (2014) emphasized that effective instruction should address student diversity and ensure that learning opportunities are accessible to all learners. In this research, role playing created

an inclusive environment because students learned collaboratively and weaker students benefited from peer support during group preparation and rehearsal.

The collaborative nature of role playing is also aligned with cooperative learning theory. Slavin (2014) explained that cooperative learning improves academic outcomes because students engage in shared responsibility and peer interaction. In this study, group discussions during scenario preparation encouraged students to negotiate meaning, share perspectives, and jointly construct understanding of Islamic concepts. This cooperative learning process allowed students to clarify moral concepts through dialogue, which contributed to deeper conceptual understanding. Gillies (2016) also argued that collaborative discussion supports higher-order thinking because students must justify opinions, respond to peer questions, and develop reasoning. This mechanism was evident in Cycle II, where students' reflective discussions became more structured and meaningful.

The findings of this study are also relevant to the nature of Islamic Religious Education, which emphasizes the integration of knowledge and practice. Islamic education is not solely intended to deliver religious information but is oriented toward internalizing values and shaping student character. Al-Attas (1999) argued that Islamic education should develop holistic understanding that connects faith, knowledge, and moral behavior. The role playing model supported this educational goal because students did not only learn theoretical definitions but also enacted moral situations and reflected on them. This process strengthened the internalization of Islamic values and helped students understand the relevance of Islamic teachings in daily life contexts.

The success of the intervention also indicates that elementary students benefit from learning models that involve creativity and imagination. Children at the primary level tend to engage more deeply when learning activities are interactive and experiential. Bruner (1966) highlighted that children learn effectively through discovery and active participation because such approaches stimulate cognitive development and strengthen conceptual representation. In this research, role playing encouraged students to explore Islamic values through imaginative enactment, which helped them understand moral concepts in a way that was meaningful and memorable.

Furthermore, the results of this study support the argument that effective teaching strategies in religious education must address both cognitive and affective domains. Islamic concepts often involve moral reasoning, emotional awareness, and ethical decision-making. Role playing facilitates affective engagement because students experience moral dilemmas and interpersonal interactions through simulated roles. Lickona (1991) emphasized that moral education should involve moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. In this study, students developed moral knowing through conceptual learning, moral feeling through emotional engagement in scenarios, and

moral action through simulated behavior. This integration contributed to improved conceptual understanding and deeper value internalization.

The improvement in student learning outcomes also reflects the importance of teacher facilitation in implementing active learning models. In Cycle I, some limitations occurred because students were still unfamiliar with role playing procedures and classroom management required adjustment. However, after reflection and revision, the teacher was able to provide clearer instructions, stronger guidance, and more structured reflection questions in Cycle II. This aligns with Arends (2012), who emphasized that student-centered learning requires teachers to act as facilitators who guide discussion, structure learning tasks, and ensure that learning objectives are achieved. Without effective facilitation, role playing may become merely an entertaining activity rather than a meaningful learning experience.

The discussion findings also suggest that reflection sessions after role play performances were critical for strengthening conceptual understanding. Without structured reflection, students may enjoy the performance but fail to connect the experience with Islamic concepts. Moon (2004) explained that reflection is essential for transforming experience into learning because it allows learners to analyze meaning, interpret outcomes, and connect experience with conceptual frameworks. In this study, the teacher's guiding questions during reflection enabled students to identify the Islamic values represented in each scenario, explain why certain behaviors were correct or incorrect, and connect these behaviors with Islamic teachings. This reflective discussion significantly contributed to the improvement observed in Cycle II.

From an educational assessment perspective, the improvement in test scores indicates that role playing strengthened students' ability to demonstrate conceptual understanding through structured evaluation. Brookhart (2010) emphasized that conceptual understanding can be measured through tasks requiring explanation, interpretation, and application rather than simple recall. The improvement in test outcomes suggests that students developed the ability to answer questions requiring reasoning and contextual application. This confirms that role playing contributed not only to student engagement but also to measurable academic improvement.

In addition, the results of this study are consistent with broader evidence indicating that active learning produces stronger learning outcomes than traditional methods. Freeman et al. (2014) concluded through meta-analysis that active learning significantly improves student performance compared to lecture-based instruction. Although their study focused largely on science education, the principle is relevant to Islamic education because conceptual understanding also requires cognitive engagement. The findings of the present study strengthen this argument by

demonstrating that active learning through role playing can significantly improve conceptual understanding in Islamic Religious Education at the elementary level.

The overall findings of this research indicate that role playing is a pedagogically appropriate and academically effective learning model for Islamic Religious Education. The improvement in mean scores and mastery learning percentage demonstrates that role playing effectively enhanced student understanding of Islamic concepts. The reduced score dispersion indicates that learning outcomes became more equitable, suggesting that the model benefits diverse learners. The qualitative observation results further confirm that role playing improved classroom participation, student confidence, and the meaningfulness of learning discussions. These findings highlight the practical implication that Islamic education teachers should consider integrating role playing into classroom instruction, particularly when teaching moral and value-based concepts that require contextual understanding.

Nevertheless, this study also suggests that role playing must be implemented systematically to achieve optimal results. Teachers must prepare scenarios carefully, ensure equitable role distribution, provide sufficient time for rehearsal and discussion, and facilitate structured reflection sessions. Without these elements, role playing may lose its instructional effectiveness. Therefore, teacher competency in planning and facilitating active learning is essential for ensuring that role playing contributes to conceptual improvement rather than becoming merely a classroom entertainment activity. This reinforces the importance of continuous professional development for teachers in implementing innovative learning models (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Fullan, 2016).

In conclusion, the results of this study provide strong evidence that the role playing learning model is effective for improving elementary students' conceptual understanding in Islamic Religious Education. The findings confirm that experiential and interactive learning approaches can significantly enhance student achievement and engagement. The improvement across cycles demonstrates that role playing supports both cognitive mastery and classroom learning equity. Thus, role playing can be recommended as an alternative instructional model for Islamic education teachers seeking to overcome low conceptual understanding and to create a more meaningful, participatory, and contextually relevant learning environment.

## **Conclusion**

This classroom action research concludes that the implementation of the role playing learning model effectively improved fifth-grade students' conceptual understanding in Islamic Religious Education at SD Negeri Grong-Grong Pidie. The improvement was consistently demonstrated through a significant increase in students' mean scores and mastery learning percentages across research stages, from the pre-cycle condition to

Cycle I and Cycle II, indicating that role playing successfully enhanced students' ability to interpret, explain, and apply Islamic concepts in meaningful and contextual ways. In addition, the decreasing standard deviation across cycles confirmed that students' learning outcomes became more evenly distributed, suggesting that the model supported not only high-achieving students but also those who initially experienced learning difficulties. These findings affirm that role playing creates an active, interactive, and experiential learning environment that strengthens student engagement, fosters collaboration, and promotes deeper conceptual mastery. Therefore, role playing can be recommended as an effective alternative instructional strategy for Islamic Religious Education teachers in elementary schools to address low conceptual understanding and to improve both the quality and equity of student learning outcomes.

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