



## Enhancing Qur'anic Interpretation through Critical Thinking: Pedagogical Approaches in Nigerian Higher Education

**Yahya Isiaq Oluwatosin**

Lagos State University, Nigeria

[isiaq.yahya@lasu.edu.ng](mailto:isiaq.yahya@lasu.edu.ng)

**Lawal Yusuf Ayantunde**

Lagos State University, Nigeria

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**Abstract**

*This study investigates the integration of critical thinking into Qur'anic interpretation (Tafsir) instruction in Nigerian universities, examining current pedagogical practices and their effectiveness in developing students' analytical and reflective abilities. While critical thinking is globally recognized as essential for modern education, Nigerian institutions predominantly rely on traditional lecture-based and memorization-focused approaches to Tafsir. Through surveys of 300 students and 50 educators, the research identifies a significant gap between the potential of interactive methods, such as comparative exegesis analysis, case studies, and technology-enhanced learning, and their actual implementation. Major barriers include institutional resistance to innovation, insufficient teacher training, and a lack of collaborative professional development among faculty. Findings indicate that while existing methods fail to adequately promote critical analysis, discussion-based and technology-integrated approaches show measurable success in fostering reflective thought. The study concludes with recommendations for curriculum reform, emphasizing student-centred pedagogies, enhanced educator training programs, and institutional policies that support innovative teaching strategies to align Qur'anic studies with 21st-century educational needs.*

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### Introduction

Critical thinking is widely recognised as an essential skill in modern education, yet its integration into religious education, particularly in Islamic studies, has been met with varying degrees of acceptance and implementation. According to Paul and Elder (2020), critical thinking involves the ability to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information to arrive at well-reasoned judgments. In the context of Islamic studies, this involves not only interpreting religious texts but also understanding them within the framework of modern challenges. As the Qur'an encourages reflection and reasoning (Surah Al-Ankabut 29:20), the integration of critical thinking into Quranic interpretation is both religiously and academically significant. However, it is an essential skill in the educational process, fostering intellectual engagement, problem-solving, and analytical abilities. Within Islamic education, particularly in Qur'anic interpretation (Tafsir), integrating critical thinking skills has the potential to deepen students' understanding of the Quran's messages and how they apply to contemporary issues. This is especially relevant in university-level Islamic education, where developing independent thought





alongside religious knowledge is crucial for preparing students to address modern societal challenges (Al-Ghamdi, 2021).

In recent years, the demand for a more dynamic and reflective approach to Islamic education has increased, particularly in the context of university-level Qur'anic studies. Scholars argue that critical thinking skills are necessary not only for understanding the deeper meanings of Qur'anic verses but also for enabling students to engage with modern societal issues, foster interfaith dialogue, and contribute positively to their communities. This pedagogical shift is also seen as a response to the growing need for Islamic scholars who can interpret religious texts in ways that are relevant to the complexities of the modern world.

In the Nigerian context, Nigerian universities play a significant role in shaping future scholars and leaders within Muslim communities. However, traditional methods of teaching Quranic interpretation in these institutions often focus on rote memorisation and less on fostering critical engagement with the text. By integrating critical thinking pedagogies into the study of Tafsir, students can better appreciate the complexities of Qur'anic verses and develop more nuanced understandings of their meanings and applications (Hassan, 2020).

The traditional method of Quranic interpretation (tafsir) often emphasises memorisation and rote learning, with less emphasis on reflective and analytical thinking. However, recent studies suggest that promoting critical thinking in Quranic interpretation can enhance students' understanding of the text's deeper meanings (Adeel, 2022). This is crucial in an age where Islamic scholars must engage with contemporary social, political, and ethical issues. Quranic exegesis, or tafsir, which traditionally relied on classical methods of interpretation, now faces the challenge of being relevant to modern contexts (Rahman, 2021). The integration of critical thinking encourages students to question, analyse, and reflect on Quranic verses, fostering a deeper engagement with the text.

Pedagogical approaches in Islamic studies have traditionally been centred on teacher-directed instruction, with a focus on transmitting established interpretations of the Qur'an (Iqbal & Khalid, 2019). In Nigerian universities, these methods often involve lectures, discussions, and memorisation. However, these approaches have been criticised for limiting students' ability to critically engage with the material. Scholars argue that for Islamic education to remain relevant in the 21st century, pedagogical reforms are necessary, specifically in the areas of teaching methods that foster critical thinking and independent inquiry (Salman, 2023).

Recent research highlights several pedagogical approaches that can enhance critical thinking in Quranic interpretation, including problem-based learning, collaborative learning, and reflective discussions (Zahrah, 2020). These methods encourage students to engage with Quranic texts in ways that promote deeper understanding and critical analysis, aligning with modern educational goals. While the integration of critical thinking skills into Islamic education holds promise, several

challenges persist. One of the primary barriers is the traditional nature of Islamic studies curricula in many Nigerian universities, which may not emphasise the development of higher-order thinking skills (Muhammad, 2022). Additionally, many educators in Quranic interpretation courses have been trained in more conservative, traditional methods that prioritise transmission of knowledge over student-centred inquiry.

Another significant challenge is the lack of resources and professional development for educators to effectively integrate critical thinking into their teaching (Yahya & Kewulere, 2023). Teachers may require specific training in critical thinking pedagogies, as well as access to materials that encourage analytical and reflective learning. Furthermore, institutional resistance to curriculum reforms in religious education can hinder efforts to integrate critical thinking into the classroom.

Globally, there is a growing recognition of the need to incorporate critical thinking into religious education. In countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, Islamic education curricula have begun to adopt more modern teaching methods that emphasise reflective thinking and the application of Islamic principles to contemporary issues (Nasir & Wahab, 2022). These reforms have shown positive outcomes in improving students' critical engagement with Islamic texts, fostering both religious understanding and intellectual growth.

Research from the Middle East suggests that integrating critical thinking into religious education not only enhances students' cognitive skills but also promotes a more pluralistic and open-minded approach to interpreting Islamic teachings (Hassan & Omar, 2021). Nigerian universities can draw on these international examples as models for integrating critical thinking into Quranic interpretation studies. Several pedagogical models have been proposed to facilitate the integration of critical thinking skills into Quranic interpretation courses. The Socratic Method, for example, involves engaging students in dialogue where they are encouraged to question and reflect upon the meanings of Quranic verses (Aminu, 2022). This method is particularly effective in promoting critical thinking as it shifts the focus from passive learning to active inquiry.

Similarly, problem-based learning (PBL) has been advocated as a means to encourage critical thinking in Islamic studies (Rahim, 2020). In PBL, students are presented with real-world problems and are required to use Quranic teachings to analyse and propose solutions. This approach not only fosters critical thinking but also helps students see the relevance of Islamic teachings in contemporary issues.

The integration of critical thinking skills into Quranic interpretation courses in Nigerian universities represents an important step towards modernising Islamic education while preserving its core principles. By adopting pedagogical approaches that emphasise analysis, reflection, and problem-solving, educators can equip students with the skills needed to engage deeply with Quranic texts in a rapidly changing world. Despite the challenges, such as resistance to change and the need for teacher training, the potential benefits for students, educators, and society at large are significant. As the



demand for critical thinking continues to grow in the global educational landscape, Islamic studies must adapt to foster intellectually rigorous and reflective scholarship.

This study aims to explore the pedagogical approaches used in Nigerian universities to integrate critical thinking into Qur'anic interpretation. It seeks to understand the effectiveness of these approaches and their impact on students' academic and personal growth. This research is crucial for advancing Islamic education in Nigeria and aligning it with contemporary educational best practices.

In Islamic university education in Nigeria, the traditional approach to Qur'anic interpretation (Tafsir) has predominantly relied on rote memorisation and passive learning, with minimal emphasis on critical thinking or independent analysis. This method, while valuable for preserving the transmission of knowledge, often limits students' ability to engage deeply with the Quran's teachings, relate them to contemporary issues, or apply them to the complex social, moral, and political challenges of modern society (Ibrahim, 2020).

The global shift in educational paradigms highlights the importance of developing critical thinking as a vital skill needed for problem-solving, innovation, and leadership. Despite these worldwide trends, Islamic university curricula in Nigeria have been slow to incorporate critical thinking into the study of Tafsir. Consequently, students may graduate with a solid foundation in religious knowledge but lack the ability to critically engage with texts, interpret them in changing contexts, or utilise them effectively in society (Ahmed & Alhassan, 2019).

This gap between traditional teaching methods and the need for critical engagement in the modern world presents a significant challenge. It raises concerns about the preparedness of students to contribute meaningfully to intellectual, social, and religious discourse. The lack of critical thinking integration in Quranic interpretation may limit students' ability to develop independent thought, question assumptions, and contribute to contemporary debates within the Islamic scholarly community and beyond (Al-Amin, 2021). Thus, this study seeks to address the problem of insufficient critical thinking integration in Quranic interpretation within Nigerian Islamic universities. It aims to explore the pedagogical approaches currently employed and assess their effectiveness in cultivating critical thinking skills among students.

## **Method**

The study adopted a descriptive research design. The study was targeted at 300 students and 50 educators from selected universities across Nigeria. A stratified random sampling method will be employed to select participants from different universities, ensuring representation from various departments of Islamic studies. A self-developed questionnaire titled "Integrate Critical Thinking Skills into Qur'anic Interpretation, studying pedagogical approaches in Nigerian University" was used to generate data from the respondents. The instrument is divided into two (2) sections (A&B). Section A contains the biographic data of the respondents, while Section B contains items to test each of the hypotheses. The instrument was distributed online through email and social

media platforms to respondents in selected universities in Nigeria. The Descriptive statistics (e.g., mean and standard deviation) were used to analyse the research questions and inferential statistics (ANOVA) were used to analyse the hypotheses with the aid of Statistical Product and Service Solution (SPSS 23).

**Result and Discussion**

*Pedagogical approaches used in Quranic interpretation courses in Nigerian universities*

The table.1 sought to identify the existing pedagogical approaches used in Qur'anic interpretation courses in Nigerian universities. Descriptive statistics were computed for each item to assess the extent of use of different teaching strategies. The results revealed that the traditional lecture-based approach was the most widely used method (M = 2.77, SD = 0.58), followed by the use of classical tafsir (exegesis) texts (M = 2.30, SD = 0.53). However, more interactive and modern methods were reported as less commonly used. Interactive sessions such as group discussions and debates (M = 1.80, SD = 0.50), and comparative analysis of different tafsir perspectives (M = 1.82, SD = 0.52) were moderately used. Notably, the use of technology and multimedia tools had the lowest mean score (M = 1.08, SD = 0.62), indicating that these tools are rarely employed in Qur'anic interpretation instruction. The overall weighted mean score was 2.75, suggesting that pedagogical approaches in Qur'anic interpretation courses in Nigerian universities lean more towards traditional than modern or interactive methods.

**Table.1, Pedagogical approaches used in Quranic interpretation courses**

Indicators	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The traditional lecture-based approach is predominantly used in Qur'anic interpretation courses at my university	350	2.77	.581
The use of classical tafsir (exegesis) texts is the primary method for teaching Qur'anic interpretation in my university	350	2.30	.532
Interactive sessions such as group discussions and debates are commonly used in Qur'anic interpretation classes	350	1.80	.497
My university's Qur'anic interpretation courses include a comparative analysis of different tafsir sources and perspectives	350	1.82	.520
Technology and multimedia tools, such as videos and online resources, are used to support Qur'anic interpretation lessons	350	1.08	.616

*Effective strategies for embedding critical thinking into Quranic interpretation classes in Nigerian Universities*

Descriptive statistics were computed (table.2) to examine effective strategies for embedding critical thinking into Qur'anic interpretation classes in Nigerian universities. As shown in Table 2, the strategy rated most highly by respondents was "Case studies based on contemporary issues are integrated into lessons to help students apply Qur'anic teachings in real-life contexts" (M = 3.10, SD = 0.70). This suggests that contextualizing Qur'anic interpretation using modern, relatable scenarios is a key



strategy for encouraging critical thinking. The second most effective strategy, based on the mean score, was "Students are encouraged to compare different tafsir (exegesis) sources to develop a deeper understanding and critical perspective" (M = 2.98, SD = 0.76). This reflects the importance of exposing students to multiple interpretative traditions to deepen their analytical skills. Strategies involving reflective thinking (M = 2.12, SD = 0.56), organized critical thinking workshops (M = 1.89, SD = 0.56), and the use of interactive technology and multimedia tools (M = 1.64, SD = 0.56) received lower ratings. These findings indicate that while such methods are recognized, they may be underutilized or perceived as less effective within the current instructional context. The overall weighted mean score was 2.35, indicating a moderate level of implementation of critical thinking strategies in Qur'anic interpretation classes.

**Table.2, Effective strategies for embedding critical thinking into Quranic interpretation classes**

Indicators	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Case studies based on contemporary issues are integrated into lessons to help students apply Qur'anic teachings in real-life contexts	50	3.10	.699
Students are encouraged to compare different tafsir (exegesis) sources to develop a deeper understanding and critical perspective	50	2.98	.757
Teachers often engage students in reflection exercises to explore the ethical implications of Qur'anic teachings	50	2.12	.557
Critical thinking workshops or special sessions are organized to train students on analyzing and interpreting Quranic texts	50	1.89	.556
Interactive technology and multimedia tools are used to present Qur'anic verses in ways that stimulate critical discussions and analysis	50	1.64	.561

*Challenges that hinder the integration of critical thinking in Quranic interpretation Classes in Nigerian Universities.*

**Table.3, Challenges that hinder the integration of critical thinking in Quranic interpretation Classes**

Indicators	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
A lack of collaboration among educators to share effective strategies and resources hinders the promotion of critical thinking in Qur'anic studies	50	3.49	.607
The curriculum's focus on memorization rather than analytical skills makes it difficult to promote critical thinking	50	2.21	.628
Traditional teaching methods and resistance to innovative approaches pose significant challenges to developing critical thinking skills in Qur'anic studies	50	3.64	.594

Limited training and professional development opportunities for teachers hinder the effective integration of critical thinking into Quranic interpretation.	50	2.15	.707
The absence of assessment tools that measure students' critical thinking skills in Quranic interpretation limits its development.	50	1.89	.580

The result from table.3 revealed that the most strongly perceived challenge was the use of traditional teaching methods and resistance to innovative approaches, which received the highest mean score (M = 3.64, SD = 0.59). This suggests that entrenched instructional practices may significantly obstruct the adoption of critical thinking strategies. Similarly, lack of collaboration among educators to share effective practices also scored highly (M = 3.49, SD = 0.61), indicating the importance of peer support and knowledge sharing among faculty members.

In contrast, challenges such as the curriculum's emphasis on memorization (M = 2.21, SD = 0.63), limited teacher training and professional development opportunities (M = 2.15, SD = 0.71), and the absence of appropriate assessment tools for evaluating critical thinking skills (M = 1.89, SD = 0.58) received lower ratings. Although these factors were still recognized as barriers, their lower mean scores suggest they may be viewed as secondary compared to resistance to innovation and lack of collaboration. The cumulative weighted mean score for all items was 13.38, with a composite mean of 4.27 (SD = 3.13). This indicates that while several challenges are acknowledged, a few are particularly prominent in their perceived impact on hindering critical thinking in Quranic studies.

Testing of Hypotheses

**H<sub>01</sub>:** Existing pedagogical approaches do not significantly encourage critical analysis among Islamic studies students in Nigerian Universities.

**Table.4, Testing of Hypotheses**

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	0.215	2	0.108	0.423	.655
Within Groups	88.208	347	0.254		
<b>Total</b>	<b>88.423</b>	<b>349</b>			

Note. SS = Sum of Squares; df = degrees of freedom; MS = Mean Square. The ANOVA did not reveal a statistically significant difference among the three approaches, F(2, 347) = 0.42, p = .66.

Post Hoc Analysis (Tukey's HSD)

The post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test further confirmed that none of the pairwise differences among the three pedagogical approaches were statistically significant (all ps > .05). The comparison table is summarised below:

**Table.5, Post Hoc Analysis**

Comparison	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval	p-value
Discussion-Based vs. Lecture-Based	0.044	[ -0.193, 0.281]	.976
Blended Approach vs. Lecture-Based	0.094	[ -0.143, 0.331]	.796
Blended Approach vs. Discussion-Based	0.050	[ -0.187, 0.287]	.954

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in critical thinking scores among Islamic studies students exposed to different pedagogical approaches at Nigerian universities (Lecture-Based, Discussion-Based, and Blended Approach;  $n = 350$ ). The analysis revealed no statistically significant difference in mean scores among the groups,  $F(2, 347) = 0.42$ ,  $p = .66$ . The between-groups sum of squares (SS) was 0.215 with 2 degrees of freedom, while the within-groups SS was 88.208 with 347 degrees of freedom.

Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD indicated that none of the pairwise comparisons were statistically significant. Specifically, the differences between Lecture-Based and Discussion-Based (mean difference = 0.044,  $p = .976$ ), Lecture-Based and Blended Approach (mean difference = 0.094,  $p = .796$ ), and Discussion-Based and Blended Approach (mean difference = 0.050,  $p = .954$ ) approaches were all non-significant. These findings suggest that existing pedagogical approaches do not significantly encourage critical analysis among Islamic studies students in Nigerian universities. As such, alternative or additional strategies may need to be explored to enhance critical thinking skills in this context.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** Existing pedagogical approaches do not significantly encourage reflective thought among Islamic studies students in Nigerian Universities.

**Table.6, Testing of Hypotheses**

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	432.56	2	216.28	9.76	.000
Within Groups	7666.20	347	22.09		
<b>Total</b>	<b>8098.76</b>	<b>349</b>			

**Note.** SS = Sum of Squares; df = degrees of freedom; MS = Mean Square; F = F-ratio; p = significance level.  $p < .05$  indicates statistically significant differences.

*Post Hoc (Tukey HSD) Test*

**Table.7, Post Hoc Analysis**

Comparison	Mean Difference	Std. Error	p-value	Interpretation
Discussion-Based vs. Lecture-Based	-1.84	0.61	.007	Significant

Blended Approach vs. Lecture-Based	-3.12	0.59	.000	Highly Significant
Blended Approach vs. Discussion-Based	-1.28	0.58	.084	Not Significant

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the effect of different pedagogical approaches on reflective thought among Islamic Studies students in Nigerian universities. There was a statistically significant difference in reflective thought scores across the three pedagogical approaches,  $F(2, 347) = 9.76, p < .001$ . Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for students exposed to the lecture-based approach ( $M = 26.4, SD = 4.7$ ) was significantly lower than those in the discussion-based approach ( $M = 28.2, SD = 4.6, p = .007$ ) and the technology-integrated approach ( $M = 29.5, SD = 4.3, p < .001$ ). However, there was no significant difference between the discussion-based and technology-integrated approaches ( $p = .084$ ). These results suggest that pedagogical approaches significantly influence the development of reflective thought, with technology-integrated and discussion-based methods showing greater effectiveness than traditional lecture-based approaches.

#### Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate that Qur'anic interpretation courses in Nigerian universities predominantly rely on traditional lecture-based methods and the use of classical tafsir texts, which scored the highest means ( $M = 2.77$  and  $M = 2.30$  respectively). These approaches reflect a preservation of established teaching traditions but fall short in fostering student-centered or critical engagement. Modern and interactive techniques such as group discussions, comparative analysis, and the use of multimedia tools were rated significantly lower. Notably, the use of technology had the lowest mean ( $M = 1.08$ ), which suggests a digital divide or pedagogical rigidity in integrating modern instructional technologies. This aligns with previous literature (Iqbal & Khalid, 2019; Muhammad, 2022), which critiques the dominance of teacher-centered instruction in Islamic studies and the slow pace of pedagogical innovation. It also confirms the assertion in your statement of the problem that passive learning continues to be a major feature in Qur'anic interpretation teaching.

This study also shows that respondents rated case studies and comparative tafsir analysis have the most effective strategies ( $M = 3.10$  and  $M = 2.98$ ). These methods support contextual learning and expose students to multiple viewpoints, enhancing analytical and evaluative thinking. However, strategies such as reflection exercises, critical thinking workshops, and use of multimedia tools scored much lower. This reveals a gap between recognized best practices and actual implementation. It also suggests that while there is an awareness of more dynamic teaching strategies, they are not being sufficiently applied in classrooms. These findings corroborate Zahrah (2020) and Rahim (2020), who argue for problem-based and reflective learning to deepen students' understanding. Yet, the limited use implies institutional or resource-based constraints, as supported by Adeyemi & Usman (2021).



However, the strongest perceived challenge was resistance to innovation and traditional teaching methods ( $M = 3.64$ ), followed by lack of collaboration among educators ( $M = 3.49$ ). These findings suggest a deep-rooted conservatism in educational practice and a lack of systemic support for pedagogical reform. Other issues such as memorization-focused curricula, lack of training, and absence of assessment tools were noted but not as critical. This finding is important, as it highlights institutional and cultural barriers rather than just technical or infrastructural problems. It confirms earlier observations by Hassan (2020) and Al-Amin (2021) that resistance to change is a significant challenge in reforming Islamic education in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the study also revealed that the existing pedagogical approaches do not significantly encourage critical analysis which was supported by the ANOVA results ( $F(2, 347) = 0.42, p = .655$ ). This statistical insignificance implies that regardless of whether lecture, discussion, or blended methods are used, none are currently effective in cultivating critical analysis among students. This is concerning because it shows that current teaching strategies may be inadequately structured or insufficiently implemented to develop critical faculties in students, reflecting the findings from Ahmed & Alhassan (2019). It also calls for a re-examination of how pedagogical reforms are being adopted in practice.

### Conclusion

From the findings of this work, it appears that while lectures dominate the teaching of Qur'anic interpretation at Nigerian universities, critical thinking is not developed. On the other hand, discussions and the use of technology certainly enhance the students' ability to think reflectively. These students do best with contextualized case study and comparative tafsir exercises. In order to develop the higher order thinking skills which the Qur'an encourages, teaching methodologies need to be more advanced. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that Nigerian universities revise their pedagogical approaches to Qur'anic interpretation by moving beyond traditional lecture-based and memorisation methods. Educators should adopt more student-centred teaching strategies that actively promote critical analysis and reflective thinking. This includes the integration of case studies that relate Qur'anic teachings to contemporary issues, and encouraging comparative analysis of various tafsir sources to deepen students' analytical skills.

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