

Date Received : December 2025
Date Revised : May 2026
Date Accepted : May 2026
Date Published : May 2026

ENHANCING STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION THROUGH ACTIVE DEBATE: A CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH STUDY AT SMK NEGERI 7 MERANGIN

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Kata Kunci:

Berpikir Kritis,
Kemampuan Berpikir
Tingkat Tinggi,
Metode Debat Aktif,
Pendidikan Agama
Islam, Penelitian
Tindakan Kelas

ABSTRAK

Latar Belakang: Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) memiliki fungsi krusial dalam pembentukan karakter, namun praktik di lapangan sering kali masih bersifat satu arah. Di SMK Negeri 7 Merangin, siswa kelas XI DKV menunjukkan rendahnya kemampuan berpikir kritis dan sikap pasif dalam mengevaluasi materi keagamaan yang kompleks. **Tujuan Penelitian:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meningkatkan kemampuan berpikir kritis siswa melalui implementasi metode debat aktif, guna mentransformasi pola belajar dari hafalan menjadi analisis logis. **Metode:** Penelitian Tindakan Kelas (PTK) ini menggunakan model Kemmis dan McTaggart yang dilaksanakan dalam dua siklus (perencanaan, tindakan, observasi, dan refleksi). Subjek penelitian terdiri dari 20 siswa, dengan instrumen pengumpulan data berupa observasi perilaku, tes kognitif, dan wawancara mendalam. **Hasil:** Temuan menunjukkan lonjakan signifikan kemampuan berpikir kritis dari 50% pada Siklus I menjadi 88% pada Siklus II. Capaian indikator spesifik meliputi partisipasi aktif (95%), kemampuan berpendapat (80%), penggunaan bukti/dalil naqli (85%), kemampuan menyanggah (80%), dan kerjasama tim yang mencapai angka sempurna (100%). **Kesimpulan:** Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa penerapan metode debat aktif efektif dalam meningkatkan kemampuan berpikir kritis serta menciptakan suasana belajar Pendidikan Agama Islam yang lebih dinamis, bermakna, dan kolaboratif di kelas XI DKV SMK Negeri 7 Merangin. Temuan ini relevan sebagai acuan bagi pendidik untuk menerapkan metode dialektika guna memperkuat benteng intelektual siswa dalam menghadapi disinformasi keagamaan di era sekarang.

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Keywords:

Critical Thinking,
Higher-Order
Thinking Skills
(HOTS), Active
Debate Methods,
Islamic Religious
Education,
Classroom Action
Research

ABSTRACTS

Background: Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays a crucial role in character development, yet classroom practices often remain one-sided. At State Vocational High School 7 Merangin, 11th-grade DKV students demonstrate low critical thinking skills and a passive attitude when evaluating complex religious materials. **Research Objective:** This study aims to improve students' critical thinking skills through the implementation of the active debate method, in order to transform learning patterns from rote memorization to logical analysis. **Method:** This Classroom Action Research (CAR) employs the Kemmis and McTaggart model, conducted in two cycles (planning, action, observation, and reflection). The research subjects consisted of 20 students, with data collection instruments including behavioral observation, cognitive tests, and in-depth interviews. **Results:** Findings indicate a significant increase in critical thinking skills from 50% in Cycle I to 88% in Cycle II. Achievements of specific indicators included active participation (95%), ability to express opinions (80%), use of textual evidence (85%), ability to refute (80%), and teamwork, which achieved a perfect score (100%). **Conclusion:** This study demonstrates that the implementation of the active debate method is effective in enhancing critical thinking skills and creating a more dynamic, meaningful, and collaborative learning environment for Islamic Religious Education in Class XI DKV at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin. These findings are relevant as a reference for educators to apply dialectical methods to strengthen students' intellectual resilience in confronting religious disinformation in the current era.

A. INTRODUCTION

Education is a comprehensive learning experience that takes place in all environments and encompasses the entire span of human life. Etymologically, the term "education" has very rich and diverse roots. In Greek, the term "*paedagogy*" refers to the practice of a servant, known as a "*paedagogos*," escorting a child to school. This perspective emphasizes physical guidance and early accompaniment in the learning process (Ahdar, 2021).

Meanwhile, Roman tradition introduced the term "*educare*," which is defined as the act of "drawing something out from within." This meaning implies that every individual possesses latent potential that needs to be uncovered and developed through educational stimulation. In English, the term evolved into "*to educate*," interpreted as a systematic effort to improve one's moral character and cultivate intellectual abilities. Regardless of these various definitions, the educational process in practice continues to unfold dynamically as a fundamental human need, without waiting for a single, uniform definition (Ahdar, 2021).

Within Indonesia's education system, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a crucial role as a learning process aimed at developing understanding, faith, and the application of religious values in daily life. PAI is not limited to the transfer of knowledge but encompasses holistic learning about the fundamentals of faith, religious practices, *akhlakul karimah* (noble character), Islamic law, and the history and culture of Islam (Mahmudi et al., 2024).

The role of PAI is highly strategic in shaping the character, morality, and spirituality of every individual. As a subject emphasizing noble values and religious practices, PAI serves to develop students into individuals of noble character who possess a deep understanding of their religious teachings (Wibowo, 2023). This serves as the

primary foundation for students to navigate moral challenges amidst shifting social values in the global era.

As we enter the 21st century, the challenges in the world of education have shifted toward mastering critical thinking skills. These skills are a primary prerequisite for students to respond wisely to various information, ideas, and the opinions of others. The responses provided involve the ability to evaluate systematically; therefore, students need to be accustomed to thinking analytically, comparing various conditions, and drawing appropriate conclusions to solve problems (Rittmann & Mpofu, 2024).

Theoretically, critical thinking is understood as a purposeful and self-regulated assessment process involving a series of interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference (Rittmann & Mpofu, 2024). In the context of this study, critical thinking is correlated with Bloom's Taxonomy at the *High Order Thinking Skills* (HOTS) level, where students are required to analyze problems, evaluate facts, and create new solutions (Susanti et al., 2020). These critical activities include seeking clear answers, constructing strong arguments, and maintaining an open mind toward new information (Faiz, 2015).

In PAI education, critical thinking plays a vital role in producing graduates with analytical, evaluative, and reflective skills regarding religious texts. Critical thinking-based learning encourages students to engage deeply in identifying arguments within religious texts, understanding historical contexts, and adopting a critical stance toward ethical and moral issues emerging in society (Rizki & Nugraha, 2023). This is crucial to ensure that religious understanding is not merely textual but contextual.

Furthermore, critical thinking enables students to avoid merely being passive listeners in the classroom or mere memorizers of texts. Students are encouraged to reflect on the meaning, relevance, and implementation of religious teachings in their daily lives. Amid the massive amount of religious information on social media, this ability helps them distinguish true teachings from deviant ones, so that they are prepared to face contemporary issues with a foundation of faith that is firm yet rational.

One of the key components supporting the achievement of these objectives is the use of appropriate teaching methods. PAI methodology is a vital component focused on the best ways to convey religious teachings to students so they can be easily internalized. In the face of fast-paced modern challenges, educators are required to continuously develop relevant techniques so that students not only understand the theory but are also able to bring these values to life in real behavior (Astuti & Ismail, 2025).

Among the various existing methods, the active debate method emerges as a progressive alternative. This method involves exchanging opinions or arguments, either individually or in groups, designed to build students' critical thinking skills (Fauziah et al., 2022). In line with Lev Vygotsky's theory, this method emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through social interaction. In debates, students actively construct meaning through the exchange of opinions, which forces them to think quickly and logically (Zulvia et al., 2025).

The implementation of Islamic Education (PAI) in Vocational High Schools (SMK) has its own distinct characteristics due to its focus on work readiness. State Vocational High School 7 Merangin, particularly in the Visual Communication Design (VCD) program, educates students to become creative professionals skilled in manipulating visual elements such as typography and illustration as communication

media. However, field observations reveal a gap; the researcher’s findings indicate that many students still possess low critical thinking skills, particularly when explaining religious topics logically and systematically.

However, based on the observations and interviews conducted by the researcher at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin, many students still lack critical thinking skills. For example, when asked about course material or a religious topic, they struggle to answer and explain concisely and logically. This also makes students less capable of selecting religious information, which is increasingly diverse and often leads to confusion.

This gap poses a serious threat because it makes students vulnerable to religious disinformation and passive learning patterns. As a solution, the implementation of the active debate method is considered strategic to stimulate critical thinking and the courage to argue among DKV students at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin. Through this method, each student is given the opportunity to express opinions, even those contrary to their own, to broaden their rational perspectives (Suherwin & Dayanti, 2020).

Based on this background, the researcher decided to conduct classroom action research to test the effectiveness of the active debate method in improving the critical thinking skills of 11th-grade DKV students at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin. Thus, the objective of this study is to improve the critical thinking skills of 11th-grade DKV students at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin through the application of the active debate method.

B. METHOD

This study employs a *Classroom Action Research (CAR)* design based on the Kemmis & McTaggart model, which is quite popular among teachers, educational staff, students, and lecturers in Indonesia. This model is frequently referenced because it is considered simpler and easier to understand. The following is the Kemmis & McTaggart model as a cyclical framework:

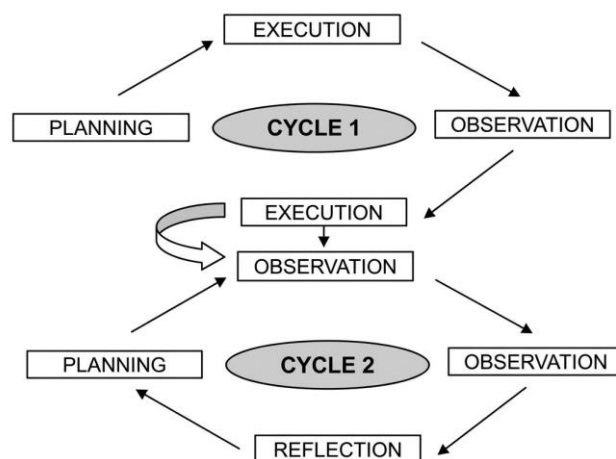


Figure 1. Kemmis & McTaggart Classroom Action Research Model (Suhirman, 2021)

This model was chosen for its systematic yet simple structure, consisting of a continuous cycle with four main stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

Classroom Action Research (PTK) focuses on reflective action to refine and improve the quality of the learning process professionally (Nanda et al., 2021).

The study was conducted at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin with 20 students from Class XI DKV as the subjects. The selection of these subjects was based on the competency requirements of the DKV program, which demands a high level of critical thinking in creating visual communication works; however, field observations indicate that their critical thinking skills still need improvement. This research is collaborative, combining the strengths of qualitative and quantitative approaches through a partnership between the researcher and the classroom teacher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The intervention implemented was the Active Debate method. This method is considered superior in making students more competent, confident, and critical. Its application in the 10th-grade class at SMKN 7 Merangin encouraged students to actively seek out, understand, and delve into the material to build strong arguments (Harahap et al., 2024).

The researcher applied ethical principles through *informed consent* to ensure the voluntary participation of students and teachers at SMKN 7 Merangin. The confidentiality of the subjects' identities was strictly maintained through the use of initials. Additionally, the researcher ensured that this study was purely intended to enhance academic benefits without disrupting the curriculum schedule or affecting the objectivity of school assessments.

Research data was collected through observation, tests, and interviews. Data collection techniques must be carried out systematically and purposefully so that the collected data can be verified for accuracy (Nashrullah et al., 2023). Observation is a data collection technique that involves direct observation of participants and the context involved in the research (Jailani, 2023). Observation is used to observe students' behavior during the debate process, such as their ability to express opinions, respond to and refute opponents with evidence, and their active engagement in the debate process within the learning context. A test is administered to students to assess the extent of improvement in their critical thinking skills; this test is also used to collect data on student evaluation outcomes (Haris et al., 2025). Interviews are the primary method for gaining an in-depth perspective from participants (Villarama, 2026), these interviews consist of questions posed by the researcher to students and teachers regarding the effectiveness, barriers, and impact of implementing the active debate method. During the interview sessions, the researcher was free to ask the informants any questions related to the study (Sahir, 2022).

The collected data was analyzed through several stages to ensure that the conclusions drawn were valid and objective. There were three stages involved in the data analysis: (1) Reduction and Coding of Observation Data: raw data from observations during the debate was categorized using coding techniques. Student behavior was coded based on indicators of critical thinking. (2) Quantitative Data Analysis (Tests): test results were analyzed using descriptive statistics to compare the percentage of mastery between Cycle I and Cycle II. (3) Data Triangulation: The researcher compared the results of observations, test scores, and statements in interviews to draw strong final conclusions (triangulation of techniques). If all three data sources showed the same upward trend, then the active debate method was deemed effective in improving students' critical thinking skills.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The research implementation and data collection process were conducted at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin, Class XI DKV, over two cycles, each consisting of planning, action implementation, observation, and reflection stages. The research results indicate that the application of the active debate method in Islamic Religious Education at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin can improve the critical thinking skills of Grade 11 DKV students. Based on the results of observations on August 5, 2025, of 20 Grade 11 DKV students, it was found that students' critical thinking skills in the learning process were low. The following are the research results presented in tabular form.

Table 1. Critical Thinking Skills

No.	Critical Thinking Indicators	Cycle I (Number of Students)	Cycle I (%)	Cycle II (Number of Students)	Cycle II (%)
1.	Active Participation	10 students	50%	19 students	95%
2.	Ability to Express Opinions	10 students	50%	15 students	80%
3.	Use of Evidence/Arguments	10 students	50%	17 students	85%
4.	Ability to Refute	8 students	40%	16 students	80%
5.	Teamwork	12 students	60%	20 students	100%
	Average	10 students	50%	17 students	88%

a. Cycle I

Cycle I was conducted over two sessions, focusing on the topic "Strengthening Faith by Upholding Honor, Sincerity, Modesty, and Asceticism." During this phase, the researcher and the Islamic Education (PAI) teacher collaborated intensively to develop teaching modules, Student Worksheets (LKPD), and systematic critical thinking assessment instruments. The teacher began the session by providing a basic explanation of the rules of active debate, then divided the students into pro and con groups to discuss a motion relevant to the learning material.

Although the learning materials had been thoroughly prepared, the results of the observation indicated that students' critical thinking skills had not yet reached the expected target. Student engagement remains moderate, with most students appearing hesitant in constructing arguments and tending to adopt a passive stance by accepting peers' opinions without offering critical responses or rebuttals. This challenge served as the basis for the researcher to conduct an in-depth evaluation and proceed to Cycle II, aiming to refine facilitation strategies to more effectively stimulate students' enthusiasm and critical reasoning.

At this initial stage, the research results indicate that students' active engagement remains moderate, at only 50%. Most students still appear hesitant and unsure when presenting arguments, tending to act as passive listeners and accept their peers' opinions without offering critical responses. Only about 40% of students have the courage to challenge opposing views, and their ability to use supporting evidence or arguments remains limited at 50%. The low achievement in this first cycle was identified as an adaptation phase, in which Visual Communication Design students, who are

accustomed to visual tasks, still require extra guidance to transform their thoughts into logical and structured oral arguments.



Figure 2. Implementation of Cycle I

b. Cycle II

The implementation of Cycle II took place over two sessions, with the primary focus on improvements based on reflections and the identification of challenges from the previous cycle. Although the learning process remained consistent with the active debate model used in Cycle I, the researcher emphasized the facilitator's role to elicit students' critical thinking more deeply. Observation results at this stage indicate a significant transformation in classroom dynamics; students who were initially passive in the first cycle now began to demonstrate courage in expressing their opinions, constructing logical rebuttals, and responding to the opposing team's arguments with stronger evidence-based grounds.

This achievement demonstrates that the active debate method not only successfully fosters a fun and interactive learning environment but is also effective in strengthening higher-order thinking skills (*HOTS*). Through this method, Islamic Religious Education instruction in Class XI DKV at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin has become far more vibrant and meaningful. Students are no longer merely memorizing texts conventionally; instead, they are intensively trained to interpret, evaluate, and reflect on the values contained in the learning materials within the context of real life through healthy debate.

Entering Cycle II, a significant transformation occurred as a result of reflection and strategy refinement conducted by the researcher in collaboration with the teacher. The atmosphere in Class XI DKV became far more dynamic and lively; students who had appeared passive in the previous cycle began to show high enthusiasm, with active engagement rates surging sharply to 95%. This change demonstrates that strengthening the planning phase and providing more contextual debate motions effectively stimulates students' critical thinking. In this cycle, students no longer merely memorized texts but began to interpret, evaluate, and reflect on PAI values within sharp arguments.



Figure 3. Implementation of Cycle II

DISCUSSION

Based on the summary table of research results, the application of the active debate method in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) instruction in Class XI DKV at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin showed significant changes between Cycle I and Cycle II. This improvement is not only reflected in students' overall academic quality but also demonstrates the importance of implementing teaching methods that facilitate active interaction and students' emotional engagement. Through this method, there has been a shift in the learning paradigm from merely being recipients of information to becoming critical processors of information.

Discussion of Each Indicator

1. Active Engagement

The active engagement indicator saw a very significant surge, rising from 50% in Cycle I to 95% in Cycle II. At the start of the intervention, only 10 students dared to participate in the learning process; however, after strategic improvements were made in the subsequent cycle, nearly all students (19 students) were fully engaged. This improvement indicates that the active debate method successfully sparked curiosity and a positive competitive spirit in the 11th-grade DKV class. Students no longer view PAI as a passive subject but rather as an open space for exploration, leading to a drastic increase in their enthusiasm for following the flow of each debate.

2. Ability to Express Opinions

Students' ability to express their opinions logically and in a structured manner increased from 50% to 80%. In Cycle I, the opinions expressed by students tended to be brief and lacked depth of analysis. However, through regular practice in active debate, students began to develop the habit of constructing a systematic framework of thought before speaking in public. Peer discussion spaces and the feedback provided during the debate process helped the 15 students in Cycle II communicate their ideas with greater confidence, clarity, and sound reasoning regarding the religious material being discussed.

3. Use of Evidence/Arguments

One of the crucial achievements in this PAI learning process is the improvement in the indicator of evidence or textual proof usage, which rose from 50% to 85%. Initially, students struggled to link their arguments to valid sources of

Islamic law. However, the pressure to win arguments in debates encouraged students to conduct independent research on religious literature before sessions began. The success of 17 students in integrating naqli arguments into their arguments in Cycle II proves that this method is effective in compelling students to think based on data and revelation, rather than merely subjective opinions.

4. Counterargument Skills

Indicators of the ability to refute show encouraging progress, rising from a low of 40% in Cycle I to 80% in Cycle II. Refuting requires a higher level of critical thinking, as students must listen carefully, identify logical flaws in their opponents' arguments, and provide an immediate counter-response. This improvement indicates that the critical reasoning of 11th-grade DKV students has begun to sharpen; they no longer accept information at face value but are able to evaluate others' statements and construct relevant counterarguments while upholding communication ethics.

5. Teamwork

The greatest improvement was achieved in the teamwork indicator, which reached a perfect score of 100% in Cycle II, up from 60% in Cycle I. This data indicates that all students (20 students) have been able to collaborate effectively within their respective groups. In the Visual Communication Design (DKV) program, which is deeply rooted in a teamwork culture, the active debate method serves as an ideal platform for training students to divide roles, such as who will be the main speaker, the evidence gatherer, or the rebuttal specialist. This collective approach ensures that no student dominates or is left behind, making the success of building arguments a shared responsibility that strengthens social bonds within the class.

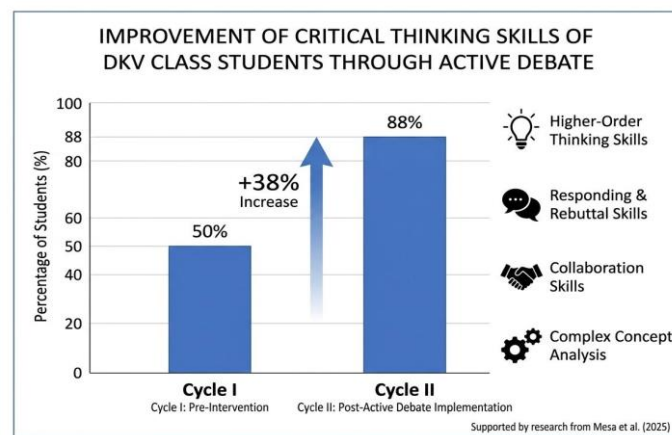


Figure. 4 Improvement in Critical Thinking Skills

Overall, 50% of students in Cycle I were in the good and very good categories for critical thinking skills, while in Cycle II, this number increased to 88% of students. This improvement reflects the success of implementing the active debate method in enhancing the critical thinking skills of Visual Communication Design (DKV) students at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin. Additionally, this learning approach, which involves students in active debates, encourages them to be more active in the learning process, enabling them to express their opinions based on existing evidence or arguments. This has proven effective in developing higher-order thinking skills. Not only have critical

thinking skills improved, but the ability to respond to or refute others' opinions in a constructive manner has also been honed, as has the ability to collaborate with classmates. This process teaches students not only to express their opinions but also to listen to and provide feedback to their peers, which in turn strengthens their critical thinking skills. This study is supported by research on " , which states that the implementation of debate methods in the classroom demonstrates the potential to foster critical thinking, communication skills, and teamwork because students are encouraged to analyze complex concepts or learning materials.

The success of the active debate method in enhancing critical thinking skills at SMKN 7 Merangin indicates that the transformation of Islamic Education (PAI) learning in vocational schools requires an approach that goes beyond mere knowledge transfer (*transfer of knowledge*). Students in creative majors such as Visual Communication Design (VCD) naturally tend to express ideas, so the debate method acts as a catalyst that transforms their creative energy into structured argumentation skills. Philosophically, this demonstrates that religious education need not be one-sided indoctrination but can instead serve as a space for dialectical discourse that challenges rational thought. By providing students with the opportunity to challenge and defend their views, teachers are actually fostering their intellectual independence, enabling them to navigate religious values amidst the often-biased currents of contemporary information.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of team collaboration in these debates offers valuable lessons on communication ethics and intellectual tolerance in matters of faith. During debate sessions, students are compelled to listen carefully to their opponents' perspectives before formulating rebuttals—a process that indirectly hones empathy and humility in accepting differing viewpoints. Beyond academic achievements, this method shapes students' character, enabling them to argue without personal attacks—a crucial interpersonal skill for vocational high school graduates entering a collaborative professional environment. Thus, integrating critical thinking into Religious Education through active debate serves as a vital foundation for producing graduates who excel not only in technical DKV competencies but also possess mature thinking and strong moral integrity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the classroom action research conducted at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin, it can be concluded that the implementation of the active debate method successfully improved students' critical thinking skills significantly in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. In Cycle I, students' critical thinking skills were still at a relatively low level, with an achievement rate of only 50%. However, after reflection and strategy refinement in Cycle II, student engagement and critical reasoning skills surged sharply to 88%. This improvement was evident across all key indicators, ranging from active participation in the learning process , the courage to present arguments grounded in accurate textual evidence (*dalil naqli*), to the sharpness in refuting opposing views and the strengthening of collaboration in teamwork. This study demonstrates that the active debate method can transform the classroom atmosphere into a more dynamic and effective environment for fostering higher-order thinking skills among students.

Recommendations

Although this study shows positive results, there are several limitations that need to be noted, such as the relatively small sample size and the context being limited to a single school and a specific major. Therefore, the researchers suggest that educators try applying the active debate method to other subjects with complex material characteristics to test the consistency of its effectiveness across disciplines. For future research, it is hoped that studies will be conducted with a larger sample size and a broader range of schools to strengthen the validity and generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, it is important to conduct longer-term studies to analyze the long-term effects of this method—whether the improvement in critical thinking skills is sustained or requires ongoing intervention. Finally, further research could explore the comparative effectiveness of the debate method across different academic backgrounds to understand how students' subject-specific competencies influence the dynamics and styles of their arguments when addressing religious issues.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank the Principal and the Islamic Religious Education teacher at SMK Negeri 7 Merangin for granting permission and providing technical assistance during the implementation of this classroom action research. The author also extends gratitude to the students of Class XI DKV for their active participation as subjects in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that there are no personal interests or financial relationships that could influence the interpretation of this study's results.

Author contributions: All authors have met the authorship criteria in accordance with applicable policies. Shinta Nurliana contributed to data collection in the field, the implementation of classroom action, and the drafting of the initial manuscript. Husarida contributed to methodological guidance, data analysis, and the review and editing of the final manuscript.

Funding: This research was conducted independently by the authors and did not receive funding support from donor agencies or other institutions.

Data availability: Data from observations, student test scores, and interview transcripts supporting the findings of this study are available and can be accessed by contacting the lead author upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not reflect the official position or policy of the Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin State Islamic University of Jambi or State Vocational High School 7 Merangin.

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