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# Exploring The Difficulty Level of Arabic Language Questions in The *Fahmil Qur'an* Book: The Key to Developing Students' Critical Thinking

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## Abstract

*Research on the contribution of Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an (MFQ) materials to developing critical thinking skills remains limited, particularly regarding its Arabic language questions. This study analyses the role of Arabic questions in the 2022 MFQ guidebook in enhancing the critical thinking skills of university students, focusing on the El-Faqih community at UIN Malang. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through Arabic tests and critical thinking questionnaires based on Angelo's framework. The results reveal that MFQ questions are designed with a scaffolded difficulty level, peaking in the final round. This structure effectively stimulates higher-order thinking skills, such as interpreting, analysing, and evaluating Qur'anic content. The findings confirm that MFQ significantly sharpens critical thinking. Therefore, educators and competition organisers should design questions that promote deeper cognitive engagement. Further research is recommended to explore additional pedagogical strategies to maximise MFQ's critical thinking benefits.*

**Keywords:** Critical Thinking, Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an (MFQ), Qur'anic Arabic, Islamic Higher Education, Higher-Order Thinking Skills.

## Abstrak

Penelitian mengenai kontribusi materi Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an (MFQ) terhadap pengembangan berpikir kritis masih terbatas, khususnya pada aspek soal bahasa Arab. Studi ini menganalisis peran soal bahasa Arab dalam panduan MFQ 2022 untuk meningkatkan keterampilan berpikir kritis mahasiswa, dengan fokus pada komunitas El-Faqih di UIN Malang. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, data dikumpulkan melalui tes dan kuesioner berdasar standar Angelo. Hasil menunjukkan soal MFQ didesain dengan tingkat kesulitan bertingkat yang memuncak di babak final. Struktur ini secara efektif mendorong keterampilan higher-order thinking seperti interpretasi, analisis, dan evaluasi konten Al-Qur'an. Temuan mengonfirmasi bahwa MFQ signifikan dalam mengasah berpikir kritis. Implikasinya, pendidik dan penyelenggara perlu merancang soal yang lebih mendorong keterlibatan kognitif mendalam. Penelitian lanjutan disarankan untuk mengeksplorasi strategi pedagogis tambahan.

**Kata Kunci:** Berpikir Kritis, Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an (MFQ), Bahasa Arab, Pendidikan Tinggi Islam, *Higher-Order Thinking Skills*.

## INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking skills are a very essential element in learning in higher education (Rivas et al., 2022; Salim et al., 2023), especially in the rapidly developing digital era. Critical thinking skills are cognitive processes carried out by students to systematically and specifically analyze the problems they face, so that they are able to distinguish problems accurately and carefully, and are able to identify and evaluate relevant information in order to formulate problem-solving strategies in learning (Azizah et al., 2018; Evendi et al., 2022). In the modern era, students need to develop critical thinking skills, as these abilities enable them to tackle various challenges effectively (Sulistiyorini & Napfiah, 2019; Anggraeni et al., 2023). Students who are trained in critical thinking tend to be more adaptable and are not confined to rigid ways of thinking or limited solutions (PAL et al., 2024). They can analyze problems from multiple viewpoints, consider different possibilities, and make well-informed decisions based on thorough evaluation. These competencies are not only valuable in academic settings but also serve as crucial assets for navigating life, the workplace, and other aspects of daily activities (Fristadi & Bharata, 2015).

Various methods have been used to improve critical thinking skills, the most well-known methods include discussion, problem-based learning, and project-based learning. (Widiastuti & Kania, 2021; Satwika et al., 2018; Sari, 2023). If we look deeper, these three methods are based on problems and issues that then require analysis to get out of the problem and answer the problem in question. This certainly also happens in *musabaqah* or competitions based on science, where participants are faced with certain problems or issues that then require cognitive and analytical abilities to solve the problem. So it can be concluded that *musabaqah* or competitions are one method that can also be applied to improve critical thinking skills. One of the *musabaqah's* that is currently popular with students and is based on science is *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an*.

*Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* is a category in *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an* (MTQ) that focuses on the mastery of *Qur'anic* verses, as well as the knowledge and comprehension of their meaning and content. This competition focuses on the ability of participants to understand and master knowledge related to the *Qur'an*, both in terms of knowledge and content (Achmad, 2013; Alfiansyah et al., 2019). Basically, this competition is like a quiz in general, where the competition is carried out with a team system, where each team consists of 3 people. Each team must answer quickly and accurately every question thrown at them by the judges. Furthermore, the competition is divided into 3 rounds, namely the preliminary round, semi-finals, and finals. The material that will be asked by the judges is material that comes from various fields of Islamic religious knowledge such as *Fahmul Ayat* (understanding of the verses of the *Qur'an*), perfecting verses, tajwid, history, fiqh, hadith, aqidah, morals, mawarits, and foreign language skills which include the ability to answer Arabic questions. Usually, each round has a different level of difficulty, the higher the round faced, the more difficult the questions that

the participants will answer. Thus, *Fahmil Qur'an* is a very complex competition because it requires an understanding of various fields of Islamic religious knowledge, one of which is knowledge of language, namely Arabic.

Arabic language questions are the main questions that often appear in every *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an*. In addition to its important position because it is the language of the *Qur'an* (Aman, 2021), the use of Arabic as a question in the competition is a step to measure the extent of the participants' abilities (Alzahrani, 2024). Receiving Arabic language questions and answering them in Arabic also requires special skills, coupled with time pressure because you have to answer in a relatively narrow time frame. The presence of Arabic language questions in *the Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* further emphasizes that this competition is not just a memorization competition but is an event that prioritizes intelligence, critical understanding, and in-depth knowledge related to many things. Thus, it is a fact that *the Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* is called a competition that can improve students' critical thinking skills.

Various studies have previously explored the impact of *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an*, the complexity of Arabic language questions, and the development of students' critical thinking skills. This indicates that the topic has attracted considerable attention from researchers. However, there remain gaps in research that specifically analyze the difficulty level of Arabic language questions in the *Fahmil Qur'an* book and their influence on students' critical thinking development. Therefore, this study aims to review several relevant prior studies.

Several studies have been conducted to measure the effectiveness of *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* on students. Such as the study conducted by Achmad (2013) related to the influence of *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* in improving student learning achievement, where the study found that students who participated in *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* tended to have satisfactory learning achievement. However, this study only discussed the influence of MFQ in improving student achievement, while the level of difficulty of the questions on the MFQ and how the questions contributed to the development of critical thinking were not discussed in this study.

Furthermore, Anwar et al. (2023) in her research entitled *Analysis of Arabic Final Semester Exam Questions: Statistical Approach and Education in Foreign Language Institutions (LPBA)*. This research analyzes the quality of Arabic final semester exam questions based on validity, discrimination power, distractor function, and difficulty level, but has not specifically highlighted its relation to the development of students' critical thinking. In addition, Maulana & Sanusi (2020) in his research entitled *Analysis of Arabic Questions for Joint Regional Final Exams (UAMBD) for Elementary Madrasahs in 2017-2018* also examined the validity of the content, reliability, difficulty level, discrimination power, and distractor function of Arabic questions for UAMBD MI in 2017-2018. However, just like the research above, the implications of the difficulty level of the questions on the development of critical thinking skills were not highlighted in this study.

Then, the study by Yusnita et al. (2022) examined the development of test questions designed to assess critical thinking skills in elementary school science subjects. Their research focused on the creation and validation of evaluation instruments within the context of science learning, aiming to produce questions

that effectively measure critical thinking in that field. In contrast, this study emphasizes the analysis of the difficulty level of Arabic language questions in the *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* (MFQ) competition and how these challenges contribute to students' critical thinking development. Finally, research conducted by Farros (2024) on Arabic language questions using a higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) framework, concluding that incorporating HOTS in Arabic language assessments can enhance students' critical thinking abilities. However, that study focused on Arabic language questions in general, without specifically addressing the difficulty level of questions in the MFQ book.

Based on the five studies mentioned, it can be concluded that most previous research has focused on analyzing the difficulty level of Arabic language questions and their impact on the development of critical thinking skills in a broader context.

While research that specifically discusses the analysis of questions contained in the *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* book which has a competition format and its relationship to the development of critical thinking was not found. Therefore, this study is here to fill this gap.

Analyzing Arabic language questions in the *Fahmil Qur'an* competition is highly urgent for enhancing the quality of learning, particularly in fostering students' critical thinking skills. As a competition that requires a profound understanding of the Qur'an and Islamic knowledge, these questions serve as an assessment tool to evaluate how well students can apply their acquired knowledge.

In this context, Arabic as the language of the *Qur'an* is a fundamental aspect that must be mastered, not only in terms of linguistics, but also in terms of understanding the religious context (Aman & Amin, 2024). Therefore, an analysis of these Arabic language questions is very necessary to ensure that the questions used in the *Fahmil Qur'an* book are designed in such a way that they not only measure memorization skills, but also encourage high-level thinking skills.

As one of the most famous competitions at the college level, many students compete to be the best in this competition, even to the point of forming a special community that focuses on mastering skills and increasing knowledge related to questions that will be competed in *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* events. El-Faqih, a community at UIN Malang is an example of the great interest of students in *Fahmil Qur'an*. El-Faqih is a community that brings together students who have a great interest in the field of Al-Quran competitions, one of which is *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an*. This community was formed at the end of 2023 by 3 UIN Malang students who were restless because there was no institution that specifically accommodated student interests in the field of *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* while the quality and quantity of UIN Malang students in *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* at that time was quite large. It was for this reason that the El-Faqih community was formed, which aims to accommodate and facilitate students who want to learn about *the Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an*.

Building on the introduction above, this study aims to analyze the Arabic language questions found in the 2022 edition of the *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* guidebook and assess their effectiveness in enhancing students' critical thinking skills, particularly among members of the El-Faqih community at UIN Malang. By examining aspects such as question difficulty, structure, and the level of comprehension required, this research seeks to provide insight into how these

questions encourage students to think more analytically, deeply, and reflectively. The findings of this study are not only relevant for improving Arabic language proficiency but also play a crucial role in fostering critical thinking skills, which are essential in both academic settings and knowledge-based competitions like *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an*.

## METHOD

### Research Design

The research method used in this study is a qualitative method with a descriptive approach (Thompson Burdine et al., 2021). This study aims to analyze the Arabic language questions contained in the 2022 edition of the *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* guidebook, and to evaluate the extent to which these questions can contribute to improving students' critical thinking skills, especially members of the El-Faqih community at UIN Malang. This study focuses on members of the El-Faqih community who have participated in at least one *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* and are active in various activities organized by the community.

### Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out through two main instruments, namely an Arabic language test taken from the 2022 edition of the *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* guidebook and a critical thinking questionnaire adapted from Angelo's critical thinking standards (Angelo, 1995) which have been proven valid and reliable. The Arabic language questions used in this test aim to measure the extent to which the questions encourage participants' analytical and evaluative abilities, which are the main components of critical thinking. Meanwhile, the critical thinking questionnaire is used to identify the development and differences in participants' critical thinking abilities before and after participating in the *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* activities.

### Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions and data verification (Ott & Longnecker, 2010). Data reduction was carried out by grouping the Arabic questions contained in the 2022 edition of the *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* book based on the preliminary round, semifinals, and finals. Then, the participants' answers were analyzed to identify the critical thinking patterns that emerged. Furthermore, the data was presented in the form of narrative descriptions, tables and graphs to provide an overview of the extent to which the questions encouraged critical thinking skills. The results of the Arabic language test and the critical thinking questionnaire were compared to see their development, then the validity of the findings was ensured using data triangulation.

**Figure 1.**

**The patterns of Data Analysis**



## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Difficulty Level of Arabic Questions in the *Fahmil Qur'an* Book

Table 1.

#### Difficulty Level of *Fahmil Qur'an* Question Towards El-Faqih Community Member

| Question Round    | Question Number | Number of Students Who Answered (N) | Number of Students Who Answered Correctly (B) | B/N Index | Question Category |
|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|---|-----------|-------------------|
| Preliminary Round | 1               | 10                                  | 5   | 0.5       | Medium            |
|                   | 2               | 10                                  | 9   | 0.9       | Easy              |
|                   | 3               | 10                                  | 8   | 0.8       | Easy              |
|                   | 4               | 10                                  | 6   | 0.6       | Medium            |
|                   | 5               | 10                                  | 6   | 0.6       | Medium            |
| Semi-final Round  | 1               | 10                                  | 10  | 1.00      | Easy              |
|                   | 2               | 10                                  | 6   | 0,6       | Medium            |
|                   | 3               | 10                                  | 9   | 0,9       | Easy              |
|                   | 4               | 10                                  | 6   | 0,6       | Medium            |
|                   | 5               | 10                                  | 4   | 0,4       | Medium            |
| Final Round       | 1               | 10                                  | 4   | 0,4       | Medium            |
|                   | 2               | 10                                  | 4   | 0,4       | Medium            |
|                   | 3               | 10                                  | 4   | 0,4       | Medium            |
|                   | 4               | 10                                  | 6   | 0.6       | Medium            |

The *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* test, which was conducted in three rounds Preliminary, Semifinal, and Final depicted an increase in the level of difficulty of the questions faced by participants as the competition progressed. In the Preliminary round, the questions asked were mostly categorized as "moderate", with a B/N index (the number of students who answered correctly compared to the total number of students who responded the question) ranging from 0.5 to 0.6. This indicates that the questions in the Preliminary round had a moderate level of difficulty, with most participants being able to answer them correctly. However, there were several easier questions, such as questions 2 and 3, with B/N indices reaching 0.9 and 0.8, respectively. This index suggests that most participants successfully answered these questions correctly, reflecting that these questions were easier than the other questions. On the other hand, questions 1 and 4 with lower B/N indices (0.5 and 0.6) indicated a greater challenge for participants in understanding and remembering the material.

In the Semifinal round, the questions given showed a more obvious increase in difficulty. Although questions 1 and 3 had high B/N indices, namely 1.00 and 0.9, indicating that these questions were relatively easy, questions 2, 4, and 5 had lower B/N indices, namely 0.6 and 0.4, indicating a higher level of difficulty. Especially question 5 with a B/N index of 0.4, indicating that only a few participants were able to answer this question correctly, illustrating that this

question was more challenging for participants than the previous questions. The increase in difficulty of questions in the Semifinal round indicates a greater challenge, which tests participants' understanding of the material in more depth.

Entering the Final round, the questions submitted were in the "moderate" category, but with a higher level of difficulty. All questions in the Final round had a relatively low B/N index, ranging from 0.4 to 0.6. These questions test the depth of participants' understanding of the contents and interpretation of the *Qur'an*, as well as their ability to relate various concepts in learning. Although the questions are classified as moderate, the lower B/N index indicates that most participants had difficulty answering these questions correctly. This suggests that in the final stage of the competition, participants encounter more complex questions that demand higher levels of critical and deep thinking to process the given information.

In conclusion, the results of the *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an* test revealed a progressive increase in question difficulty from the Preliminary round to the Final. In the Preliminary round, most of the questions were categorized as "moderate" with a few easier questions, indicating adequate basic understanding from the participants. However, in the Semifinal round, the level of difficulty began to increase, with several questions challenging participants to think more deeply, especially question 5 which had a low B/N index. The Final round showed the highest level of difficulty, with questions that tested the depth of participants' understanding and critical thinking skills in analyzing the *Fahmil Qur'an* material. This increase is in line with the principles of competency assessment, where questions are designed to measure the level of participants' understanding and ability to solve more complex problems (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Tsai et al., 2023; Sistermans, 2020). These results also indicate the importance of developing critical and analytical thinking skills among participants, which is an integral part of the learning process in a competition based on *Qur'anic* knowledge (Paul & Elder, 2006; Syam, 2024).

The principles of competency assessment aim to comprehensively evaluate an individual's understanding and abilities across various skill domains, including cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. In cognitive assessment, Anderson and Krathwohl revised Bloom's taxonomy, categorizing the cognitive domain into six levels: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. These levels illustrate the hierarchy of complexity of thinking skills, with the highest level being creating, which involves creatively integrating information to produce new solutions or products.

In designing competency questions such as in *Musabaqah Fahmil Qur'an*, this principle is applied by providing questions that have varying levels of difficulty gradually. In the early stages, questions may only measure the ability to remember and understand basic concepts, which are important for building a foundation of knowledge. At higher stages, such as the semifinals and finals, the questions are structured to evaluate participants' abilities to analyze, assess, and generate solutions for more complex problems. This is important to ensure that participants have the ability to not only understand the material, but also apply it in contexts that require critical and analytical thinking (Brookhart, 2010; Sarwari & Kakar, 2023).

The cultivation of critical and analytical thinking skills is a fundamental aspect of competency-based education. Paul and Elder describe critical thinking as the capacity to think clearly, logically, and independently while considering various perspectives in decision-making and problem-solving. In competitions such as *Fahmil Qur'an*, questions that require in-depth analysis and evaluation demonstrate the importance of these skills. For example, when participants are asked to understand the context of a verse, relate it to other concepts in the *Qur'an*, or apply it to contemporary issues, they are exercising their critical thinking skills. These skills are not only relevant to success in competitions but also to academic and professional success in general.

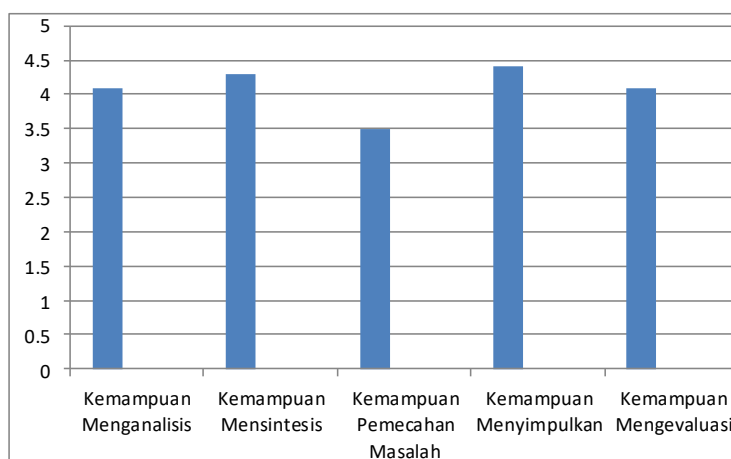
Recent research also shows that learning approaches that focus on developing critical thinking have a positive impact on learning. For example, a study by Facione emphasized that students who were trained to think critically showed significant improvements in problem-solving and decision-making skills. (Facione et al., 2020) This is in line with the importance of designing questions that require not only correct answers, but also a deep thinking process to reach those answers.

To improve the quality of learning through competitions such as *Fahmil Qur'an*, test makers and educators need to consider these principles in depth. They must ensure that the questions not only vary in difficulty, but are also designed to encourage students to think beyond the level of understanding and remembering. This allows for the formation of more comprehensive critical and analytical thinking skills, which are useful not only in the academic realm, but also in everyday life and the professional world.

#### **Dimensions of Students' Critical Thinking Based on Angelo's Indicators**

**Figure 2.**

**The Diagram of Five Pillars Critical Thinking Indicators Towards El-Faqih Community Member**



The diagram above presents five dimensions of students' critical thinking skills: analysis, synthesis, problem-solving, conclusion-making, and evaluation. Each dimension is measured on a scale from 0 to 5, representing the degree of proficiency in each skill. Overall, the results suggest that students possess strong



critical thinking abilities, though notable variations exist across different dimensions.

The analytical ability recorded a score close to 4.5. This indicates that students have good skills in breaking down information into essential elements, recognizing patterns, and understanding relationships between concepts. According to Facione, analytical skills are the main foundation in critical thinking because they help individuals build strong arguments and solve complex problems with a systematic approach (Facione et al., 2020).

The ability to synthesize, which has the highest score (around 4.6), indicates that students can integrate information from various sources to generate new ideas or solutions. This ability reflects not only creativity but also higher-order thinking skills that are oriented towards innovation. As explained by Paul and Elder, the ability to synthesize plays a vital role in academia because it helps individuals make connections across disciplines to understand phenomena holistically (Paul & Elder, 2006).

However, problem-solving ability has a relatively lower score, which is 3.8. This result indicates that students still face challenges in applying their knowledge practically. This is in line with recent research by Brookfield, which states that although students are often strong in theoretical aspects, they need more hands-on experience or problem-based learning to enhance problem-solving skills (Brookfield et al., 2022; Karan & Brown, 2022).

The ability to conclude and evaluate also showed good results, with scores of 4.5 and 4.4 respectively. Students were able to draw logical conclusions from available information and critically evaluate the validity of data and arguments. This reflects a deep understanding and reflective approach to thinking. As Halpern explains, the ability to evaluate is essential in the modern information age to filter relevant information and avoid bias (Halpern, 2013).

Overall, this diagram reflects an established profile of students' critical thinking, with strengths in synthesis and slight weaknesses in problem solving. These results suggest that learning that focuses more on developing adaptive and problem-solving skills can be a priority, so that students' critical thinking skills become more balanced and applicable in various situations.

### **Implications of the Level of Difficulty of Arabic Language Questions in the *Fahmil Qur'an* Book on Students' Critical Thinking Skills**

The difficulty level of Arabic language questions in the *Fahmil Qur'an* book plays a crucial role in shaping students' critical thinking skills. These questions are structured with varying degrees of complexity, covering vocabulary comprehension, grammatical analysis, and deep textual interpretation. This complexity compels students to go beyond surface-level understanding, requiring them to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information to determine the correct answers. Thus, the level of difficulty of these questions becomes an important stimulus in training and honing their critical thinking skills.

The first implication that can be observed is the development of students' analytical skills. In facing questions that require a deep understanding of language structure, students are challenged to identify important elements, such as grammatical patterns and semantic context. This analysis process involves breaking down complex information into smaller, more manageable parts, which

ultimately helps students understand the relationships between these elements. This analytical ability is the basis for higher critical thinking skills, such as evaluation and synthesis (Yusuf et al., 2024).

In addition, questions with a high level of difficulty also encourage students to develop evaluative skills (Nappi, 2017). Students must evaluate arguments or possible answers based on a particular context. They must consider the validity of the information provided in the question and ensure that their answers are supported by strong evidence or logic. This process not only trains students to think reflectively but also builds sensitivity to detail, which is very important in the academic and professional world.

The ability to synthesize is another key aspect influenced by the complexity of the questions (Xiong et al., 2018). In certain cases, students must integrate multiple sources of information or linguistic concepts to arrive at the correct answer. For instance, questions related to Quranic interpretation require students to connect their understanding of Arabic grammar, tafsir, and historical context. This process fosters creative and systematic thinking, which lies at the heart of advanced critical thinking skills.

However, the high level of difficulty also has its own challenges. Students who are less accustomed to complex problems may find it difficult, which can affect their motivation and confidence (Yousefabadi et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important for teachers or problem makers to ensure that the problems in the *Fahmil Qur'an* book are not only challenging but also provide opportunities for progressive learning. Thus, students can progress gradually without feeling burdened by the level of difficulty that is too high.

Overall, the difficulty level of Arabic language questions in the *Fahmil Qur'an* book plays a significant role in enhancing students' critical thinking abilities. The processes of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis involved in answering these questions help cultivate a more reflective, structured, and adaptable mindset. This impact extends beyond competitions, benefiting students in their academic and professional pursuits. With an appropriate approach, these questions can serve as an effective learning tool to improve both Arabic language education and students' critical thinking skills.

## CONCLUSION

The difficulty level of the Arabic language questions in the *Fahmil Qur'an* book has significant implications for students' critical thinking skills. The questions presented with varying levels of difficulty are able to encourage students to hone their analytical, evaluation, and synthesis skills. Students are trained to understand language structures, evaluate answers, and construct logical arguments based on available information. This ability is very relevant to academic needs because it not only helps students face competitions such as *Fahmil Qur'an*, but also supports their critical thinking skills in various academic contexts. The challenging level of difficulty of the questions provides a stimulus for deeper thinking, but also requires a systematic learning approach so that students can develop gradually without losing motivation.

Overall, the *Fahmil Qur'an* book not only functions as a medium for learning Arabic, but also as a tool for developing students' critical thinking competencies.

Future research could explore how different difficulty levels in *Fahmil Qur'an* questions impact various aspects of critical thinking, such as problem-solving and reasoning skills, as well as examine the effectiveness of specific teaching strategies in helping students master these questions.

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