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Ice Breaking Strategy Innovations in Creating Joyful and Participatory Student Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Classroom learning environments that lack emotional engagement often lead to decreased student participation and reduced learning effectiveness. One contributing factor is the dominance of conventional teaching methods that provide limited opportunities for interactive and joyful learning experiences. This study aims to examine how innovative ice breaking strategies can create a more joyful and participatory learning environment in secondary classrooms. The research employed a Classroom Action Research design involving students of class XI at SMK Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyin Putri. Data were collected through participatory observation, interviews with teachers and students, and documentation of classroom activities across several learning cycles. The analysis followed an iterative process to identify patterns of student engagement and classroom participation throughout the intervention. The findings indicate that integrating structured ice breaking activities such as rhythmic clapping, brief humor interactions, and short interactive games significantly improved classroom atmosphere and student participation. Students demonstrated greater attentiveness, enthusiasm, and willingness to interact during the learning process. The study concludes that ice breaking strategies function not merely as entertaining classroom activities but as pedagogical tools that support emotional readiness and active participation in learning. These findings contribute to the development of creative classroom management strategies that foster joyful and participatory learning environments in secondary education.

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INTRODUCTION

The accelerating currents of globalization and digital transformation have profoundly reshaped the moral landscape of contemporary societies, raising renewed concerns about the foundations of ethical character among younger generations. Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, the concept of Tauhid the affirmation of the absolute unity of God occupies a central position not only as a theological doctrine but also as the ethical axis that guides human consciousness, responsibility, and social conduct. Tauhid establishes a worldview in which moral behavior is inseparable from spiritual awareness, reminding individuals that every action carries metaphysical accountability before God. In an era characterized by rapid cultural change, technological disruption, and the diffusion of competing value systems, the reinforcement of Tauhid-based moral consciousness becomes increasingly urgent for Muslim communities (A'yun et al., 2025). Numerous scholars have argued that when Tauhid is internalized meaningfully, it functions as a powerful framework for shaping integrity, humility, and social responsibility (Suhernawati et al., 2024). Consequently, strengthening Tauhid education within formal schooling is not merely a curricular obligation but a strategic endeavor to cultivate morally grounded citizens capable of navigating the complexities of modern life.

Despite its fundamental importance, the pedagogical transmission of Tauhid within formal Islamic education often encounters significant conceptual and instructional challenges. In many educational contexts, Tauhid is predominantly taught through doctrinal explanations and textual memorization, with limited opportunities for students to engage with the concept reflectively or experientially. Such instructional practices frequently result in what educational theorists describe as "cognitive religiosity," where students demonstrate familiarity with theological terminology but struggle to translate that knowledge into meaningful moral orientation (Smith et al., 2025). The difficulty lies not in the complexity of Tauhid itself but in the pedagogical methods employed to convey it. When theological ideas are presented as static information rather than dynamic principles guiding human life, students may perceive religious learning as detached from their lived experiences. This condition can lead to a form of intellectual disengagement in which learners participate in religious education merely as an academic requirement rather than as a transformative process shaping their worldview. Addressing this pedagogical challenge therefore requires innovative instructional approaches capable of bridging doctrinal knowledge with students' cognitive and emotional engagement.

The urgency of such pedagogical innovation becomes even more evident when examining classroom realities in secondary education settings. Observations derived from a classroom action research report conducted in an

Islamic secondary school reveal that students often exhibit low participation during lessons on Tauhid and related moral concepts. Many learners appear disengaged during conventional lecture-based instruction, demonstrating limited interaction with the teacher and minimal involvement in classroom discussions. The learning atmosphere tends to become monotonous and overly teacher-centered, which gradually reduces students' motivation to explore the conceptual meaning of Tauhid beyond its formal definition. As documented in the classroom action research report that forms the empirical basis of this article, several students initially showed passive learning behaviors such as inattentiveness and reduced participation during lessons on Islamic moral education. These observations highlight a broader pedagogical challenge: when instructional methods fail to accommodate the interactive learning preferences of adolescents, theological subjects may appear distant and abstract. Such conditions emphasize the need for pedagogical strategies capable of revitalizing classroom engagement and transforming the way Tauhid is understood by students.

In response to these challenges, cooperative learning models have gained increasing attention within contemporary educational research due to their capacity to foster active participation, collaborative interaction, and deeper conceptual understanding. Among these models, the Team Games Tournament (TGT) approach has emerged as a particularly promising strategy. Originally developed within cooperative learning theory, TGT integrates structured group collaboration with academic competitions that motivate students to actively engage with learning material (Smith et al., 2025). Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated that TGT can enhance student motivation, participation, and academic achievement across various disciplines, including mathematics, science, and language learning (Bayhon & Orongan, 2025; Kong-in et al., 2025). In the context of Islamic education, several researchers have also reported positive outcomes when TGT is applied to subjects such as Islamic jurisprudence or Qur'anic studies, where collaborative problem-solving encourages deeper comprehension of religious material (Ajmain et al., 2025). These findings suggest that interactive learning environments combining cooperation and competition may provide an effective pedagogical alternative to traditional lecture-based approaches.

Nevertheless, a closer examination of existing literature reveals that many studies focusing on the application of TGT in Islamic education remain concentrated on subjects involving procedural or narrative learning, such as fiqh or Islamic history. Relatively little attention has been devoted to exploring how this model can facilitate the learning of abstract theological concepts such as Tauhid. This gap is significant because Tauhid represents a foundational

metaphysical principle that requires not only cognitive comprehension but also reflective interpretation (Zakkiyah et al., 2025). Conventional cooperative learning approaches may improve participation, yet they do not necessarily guarantee that students will develop a deeper theological awareness of the concept being studied. Moreover, previous research often measures success primarily through short-term academic achievement rather than examining whether instructional interventions lead to meaningful conceptual transformation (Dörrenbächer-Ulrich et al., 2024). The absence of studies that specifically address innovative adaptations of TGT for teaching abstract Islamic theological concepts indicates a critical gap in the current scholarship. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing pedagogical strategies capable of integrating interactive learning with the epistemological depth of Islamic religious education.

Against this backdrop, the present study introduces an innovative adaptation of the Team Games Tournament model designed specifically to facilitate the transformation of students' understanding of Tauhid. Unlike conventional implementations of TGT that focus primarily on competitive quizzes, the model developed in this research integrates collaborative conceptual discussion, structured academic games, and reflective learning phases that encourage students to reinterpret Tauhid within their own social and ethical contexts. By situating theological concepts within interactive learning environments, the approach aims to transform Tauhid from an abstract doctrinal idea into a lived conceptual framework that resonates with students' cognitive and emotional experiences. Drawing upon empirical data generated through classroom action research conducted in an Islamic secondary school, this study explores how innovative pedagogical interventions can reshape students' engagement with religious learning. Through this investigation, the research contributes to the development of a more dynamic pedagogical model for Islamic education one that aligns the doctrinal integrity of Tauhid with contemporary learner-centered instructional practices while simultaneously enriching the broader discourse on innovative teaching strategies in religious education.

METHOD

This study employed an empirical field research approach using a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design to examine the transformation of students' understanding of Tauhid through the implementation of an innovative Team Games Tournament learning strategy. Classroom Action Research was selected as the methodological framework because it enables researchers to address practical pedagogical problems directly within the natural classroom setting while simultaneously generating reflective insights into teaching practice.

Unlike conventional experimental approaches that emphasize controlled variables, CAR emphasizes a cyclical process of planning, action, observation, and reflection that allows instructional interventions to be continuously refined based on classroom realities. This reflective practice-oriented approach is particularly suitable for Islamic education contexts where instructional challenges often emerge from dynamic interactions among students, teachers, and learning environments. The conceptual foundation of this design follows the action research framework proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart, which highlights the importance of iterative cycles and collaborative inquiry in educational improvement (Kemmis et al., 2013). The study was conducted in a junior secondary Islamic education class at SMP Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyin, Banyuwangi, Indonesia. The site was selected purposively due to the observed instructional challenges related to students' limited participation and difficulty in understanding abstract Tauhid concepts during conventional lecture-based instruction. The research involved a class of students who participated in three consecutive action cycles, each consisting of instructional planning, implementation of the TGT-based learning activities, systematic observation of classroom interactions, and reflective evaluation to inform subsequent pedagogical improvements.

Data collection in this study employed multiple qualitative and quantitative techniques in order to capture both the instructional process and the learning outcomes generated through the intervention. Participatory classroom observations were conducted throughout each cycle to document student engagement, participation patterns, and interaction dynamics during the implementation of the innovative TGT model. These observations were complemented by semi-structured in-depth interviews with students and the collaborating teacher to explore participants' perceptions of the learning experience and their evolving understanding of Tauhid concepts. In addition, documentary evidence was gathered through learning assessments, classroom records, and students' performance results in order to identify changes in conceptual comprehension across the intervention cycles. The collected data were analyzed using the interactive analytical model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of three interconnected analytical stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification [Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014]. During the data condensation stage, observational notes, interview transcripts, and assessment records were systematically coded through thematic coding to identify emerging patterns related to conceptual transformation and student engagement. The condensed data were then organized into structured displays to facilitate cross-cycle comparison and interpretation. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the

study employed triangulation strategies involving both source triangulation and methodological triangulation. By comparing information obtained from observations, interviews, and documentary evidence, the analysis ensured that the interpretation of results was supported by multiple converging sources of empirical data.

RESULT

Innovative Ice Breaking Strategies in Creating Joyful and Participatory Learning Environments

The term innovative ice breaking strategy in this study refers to a structured instructional approach in which brief interactive activities are intentionally inserted during classroom learning to restore students' focus, reduce boredom, and stimulate participation in the learning process. Within the context of this research, innovation does not merely refer to the use of simple classroom games, but to the systematic integration of ice breaking into the instructional cycle through several variations such as concentration clapping games, short humor-based interaction, and quick-response question sessions that reconnect students to the lesson. A joyful and participatory learning environment was operationally measured through observable indicators including students' attentiveness during instruction, active verbal responses, willingness to participate in classroom interaction, and visible emotional expressions such as enthusiasm, laughter, and engagement during the learning process. These indicators were documented through observation sheets, classroom field notes, and student performance records obtained during the three action cycles conducted in the classroom action research.

Interview data from the classroom teacher indicated that the implementation of ice breaking strategies significantly altered the classroom atmosphere. One teacher explained:

> *"Before using ice breaking, the class atmosphere was often too serious and students quickly became bored. When short games or clapping activities were inserted during the lesson, students immediately became more enthusiastic and focused again on the material."*

This statement illustrates that the introduction of structured ice breaking activities functioned as a pedagogical mechanism for restoring students' attention and emotional readiness for learning. From the researcher's perspective, the teacher's observation indicates that learning engagement was closely connected to the emotional climate of the classroom. When the learning atmosphere shifted from rigid to relaxed, students appeared more willing to interact and respond to instructional prompts.

A similar perspective emerged from interviews with students who participated in the classroom activities. One student expressed:

"When the teacher suddenly asks us to do clapping games or funny activities, we feel refreshed. After that it becomes easier to focus on the lesson again."

The student's response suggests that ice breaking activities not only function as entertainment but also serve as a cognitive reset that helps learners regain concentration during extended learning sessions. The researcher interprets this response as evidence that brief interactive interruptions during instruction create a psychological transition that helps students move from a state of fatigue to renewed cognitive readiness. Consequently, the integration of ice breaking appears to contribute to the development of a more engaging and participatory learning environment.

Classroom Participation Development Across Learning Cycles

Table 1. Student Participation Improvement Across Action Research Cycles

Cycle	Average Participation Score	Category
Cycle I	55	Moderate
Cycle II	65	Good
Cycle III	85	High

Based on Table 1, a gradual improvement in students' classroom participation was observed throughout the learning cycles. During the first cycle, participation remained relatively moderate as students were still adapting to the instructional strategy. However, the second cycle showed noticeable improvement as students became more familiar with the learning format. By the third cycle, participation levels reached a significantly higher category, indicating that the integration of ice breaking activities had contributed to increased engagement and classroom interaction.

Table 2. Indicators of Joyful Learning Before and After Ice Breaking Implementation

Indicator	Before Implementation	After Implementation
Student attentiveness	Low	High
Classroom enthusiasm	Moderate	Very High
Student interaction	Limited	Active
Learning atmosphere	Monotonous	Enjoyable
Student confidence	Moderate	Increased

As illustrated in Table 2, several indicators of joyful learning improved after the ice breaking strategy was implemented. Students appeared more attentive, interaction among classmates increased, and the classroom atmosphere shifted from monotonous to more enjoyable and dynamic.

Classroom observations further confirmed the changes in learning dynamics following the implementation of the innovative strategy. At the beginning of the instructional sessions, students tended to display signs of fatigue such as reduced eye contact with the teacher and limited participation in discussions. However, when the teacher introduced short ice breaking activities

such as rhythmic clapping games designed to train concentration the atmosphere of the classroom changed noticeably. Students became more alert, some responded with laughter, and several began to actively answer questions related to the lesson. The transition from instructional explanation to ice breaking and back to the learning material created a rhythm in the classroom that appeared to sustain students' attention for longer periods. The researcher observed that students who were previously passive gradually began contributing to classroom interaction during later cycles of the intervention.

In summary, the data obtained from interviews, observations, and participation records consistently indicate that the integration of ice breaking strategies contributed to a more engaging classroom environment. Students demonstrated higher levels of attention, enthusiasm, and willingness to participate in learning activities. The progressive improvement observed across the action research cycles suggests that the instructional intervention successfully facilitated the development of a more positive and interactive learning atmosphere.

A closer examination of the findings reveals a consistent pattern in which the use of ice breaking activities functioned as a catalyst for participatory learning. Each cycle demonstrated that when interactive activities were strategically placed between instructional segments, students responded with increased engagement and readiness to participate. This pattern indicates that the combination of short cognitive breaks and collaborative classroom interaction played an important role in maintaining students' learning motivation. The data therefore suggest that the innovative use of ice breaking strategies can serve as an effective mechanism for fostering joyful and participatory learning environments.

Visual Representation of the Joyful–Participatory Learning Cycle

The transformation of classroom dynamics observed in this study can be conceptualized through a visual model referred to as the Joyful–Participatory Learning Cycle.

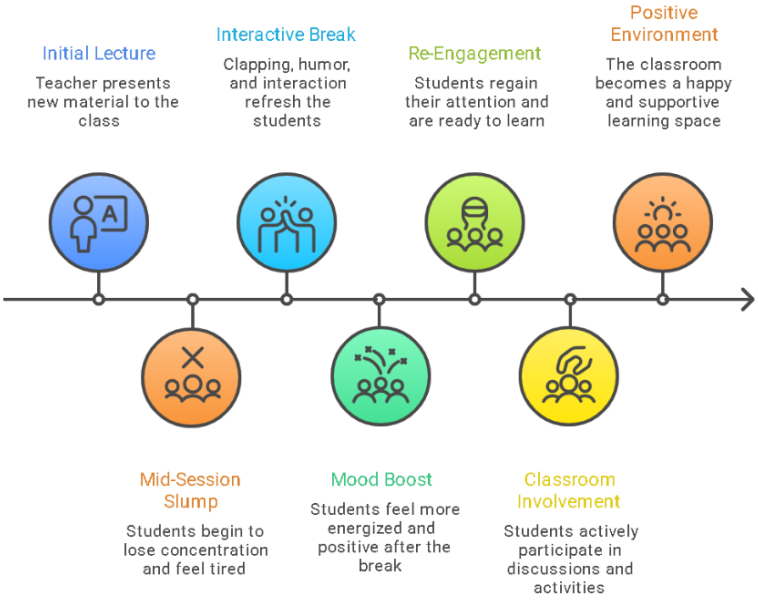

Figure 1. The Joyful–Participatory Learning Cycle through Ice Breaking Strategy

The diagram illustrates how ice breaking activities function as a transitional mechanism between phases of declining attention and renewed participation. When inserted strategically within the instructional process, these activities create a cyclical pattern in which emotional refreshment leads to restored focus, which subsequently encourages active student participation. This cycle ultimately contributes to the development of a joyful and participatory classroom learning environment.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the integration of innovative ice breaking strategies effectively transformed the classroom atmosphere from a passive learning environment into a more engaging and participatory space. The intervention functioned as a pedagogical catalyst that disrupted students' cognitive fatigue during prolonged instructional sessions. In many classroom contexts, sustained teacher-centered instruction gradually diminishes students' attention and motivation, particularly among adolescents who naturally require interactive and stimulating learning environments. The insertion of brief ice breaking activities such as rhythmic clapping, humor-based interactions, and quick-response challenges appears to have provided a psychological reset that restored students' attentional focus and emotional readiness to learn. This dynamic aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing that emotional engagement plays a crucial role in sustaining students' cognitive participation in classroom learning (Alam & Mohanty, 2024; Guo et al., 2025). When the emotional climate of the classroom shifts from rigid to relaxed and enjoyable, students tend to

demonstrate higher willingness to interact, respond, and collaborate with peers. In this sense, the innovative ice breaking strategy observed in this study did not merely function as an entertaining classroom diversion but served as a strategic pedagogical intervention capable of revitalizing the learning atmosphere.

These findings resonate with a growing body of research highlighting the role of joyful learning environments in promoting active student participation. Several studies have shown that incorporating short interactive activities within instructional sequences can significantly enhance students' engagement and classroom interaction (Ma et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2025). Similar results were reported in research examining game-based learning strategies in secondary education, where playful learning interruptions were found to increase attentiveness and reduce classroom monotony (Strasser et al., 2024). Within the context of cooperative and participatory learning, ice breaking activities function as a transitional mechanism that reconnects students to the learning process after periods of declining concentration. However, the present study extends these insights by demonstrating how such strategies can be systematically integrated into routine instructional practice rather than used sporadically. While previous research often treats ice breaking as a supplementary classroom technique, the findings here suggest that its deliberate integration into lesson structures can produce a sustained shift in classroom participation patterns. This distinction positions the present study within the broader discourse on learner-centered pedagogy that prioritizes emotional engagement as a prerequisite for meaningful participation (Koehler & Meech, 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, the effectiveness of the ice breaking strategy can be understood through several complementary frameworks within contemporary educational psychology. One relevant explanation emerges from the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that students learn more effectively when emotional barriers such as boredom, anxiety, or fatigue are minimized (Koehler & Meech, 2022). Ice breaking activities appear to lower these affective barriers by creating a relaxed and enjoyable classroom climate that facilitates cognitive receptivity. In addition, the observed engagement patterns correspond with Flow Theory, which suggests that optimal learning occurs when students experience a balance between challenge, enjoyment, and active participation (Hong et al., 2025). When brief playful challenges were inserted into the instructional sequence, students appeared to re-enter a state of focused engagement that sustained their involvement in subsequent learning tasks. The findings also resonate with principles of social constructivism, where knowledge is actively constructed through interaction and shared participation in learning activities (Paavola et al., 2023; Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). Through ice breaking interactions, students became more willing to communicate, respond to peers,

and participate in classroom dialogue, thereby creating conditions conducive to collaborative learning.

Beyond theoretical significance, the practical implications of these findings are particularly relevant for teachers and educational practitioners seeking to cultivate more dynamic classroom environments. Traditional classroom management strategies often emphasize discipline and instructional efficiency, yet they may inadvertently neglect the emotional dimensions of learning that influence students' engagement. The results of this study suggest that integrating structured ice breaking activities into lesson planning can serve as an effective strategy for sustaining students' attention and motivation during extended learning sessions. For educators, this implies that classroom management should not solely focus on controlling behavior but also on designing learning rhythms that accommodate students' psychological needs. Strategic transitions between instructional explanation and interactive activities appear to help maintain cognitive alertness and reduce learning fatigue. For school administrators and curriculum designers, these insights highlight the importance of supporting teacher training programs that emphasize creative instructional strategies capable of fostering joyful and participatory learning environments (Han, 2024; Revenko et al., 2024).

The novelty of this study lies in its conceptualization of ice breaking not merely as an incidental classroom technique but as a structured pedagogical innovation integrated within the broader instructional process. Rather than functioning as a temporary distraction from academic learning, the ice breaking activities in this research operated as a strategic component of classroom engagement cycles that revitalized students' focus and participation. This reframing contributes to the evolving discourse on participatory learning environments by illustrating how brief affective interventions can significantly influence classroom dynamics. The findings therefore extend existing scholarship on joyful learning by demonstrating that small yet intentional pedagogical modifications can generate substantial improvements in students' engagement and participation. By situating ice breaking strategies within a systematic classroom intervention framework, this study offers a practical and theoretically informed contribution to the design of learning environments that prioritize both cognitive engagement and emotional well-being, ultimately reinforcing the importance of integrating affective considerations into contemporary educational practice.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the innovative integration of ice breaking strategies can effectively transform classroom dynamics into a more joyful and participatory learning environment. The findings reveal that brief interactive activities, when strategically embedded within instructional sequences, function as a pedagogical mechanism that refreshes students' cognitive focus and emotional readiness for learning. Rather than serving merely as entertainment, ice breaking activities operate as structured transitions that restore attention, stimulate interaction, and encourage active participation in the learning process. The most important lesson emerging from this research is that meaningful classroom engagement often depends on the teacher's ability to manage the emotional rhythm of learning. By cultivating moments of relaxation and interaction, educators can reconstruct students' mental readiness to absorb academic content more effectively.

The study contributes to the growing discourse on creative classroom management by demonstrating how small pedagogical innovations can significantly influence students' engagement and learning participation. As a classroom action research project conducted within a specific educational setting, the findings remain context-bound and may not fully represent broader educational environments. Future research should therefore explore the application of structured ice breaking strategies across diverse schools, age groups, and subject areas to examine their broader pedagogical impact. Further studies may also investigate the integration of digital or gamified ice breaking approaches to support contemporary learning environments. Strengthening participatory learning cultures through such innovations remains essential for fostering more responsive and human-centered educational practices.

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