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Cognitive Learning Theory from an Islamic Perspective: A Conceptual and Content Analysis

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Abstract

Cognitive Learning Theory emphasizes mental processes as the foundation of how individuals acquire, organize, and process knowledge. Rather than viewing learning solely as a response to external stimuli, this theory highlights the role of cognitive structures, perception, memory, attention, and higher-order thinking. This study aims to examine the core concepts of Cognitive Learning Theory and analyze their relevance from an Islamic perspective. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, this study reviews key sources in educational psychology, peer-reviewed journals, and Islamic literature, including Quranic verses and the perspectives of Muslim scholars. The findings indicate that fundamental cognitive concepts such as reason, understanding, reflective thinking, and internal reinforcement are strongly aligned with Islamic educational principles. The Quran emphasizes the use of reason through concepts such as tadabbur, tafakkur, and ta'aqqul, which correspond to cognitive processes highlighted in modern learning theory. This study argues that integrating Cognitive Learning Theory with Islamic educational values contributes to the development of learning strategies that are both cognitively effective and ethically grounded.

INTRODUCTION

Learning is conceptually understood as a process of change that occurs through practice and experience, rather than as a result of biological growth or maturation alone. From an educational perspective, learning is defined as a process of improving and developing human behavior and competencies through the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, attitudes, and understanding (Zaini & Nugraha, 2020). The learning process is not limited to cognitive development but also encompasses affective and psychomotor dimensions, such as interests, attitudes, self-confidence, and adaptive abilities (Gocer, 2016; Khilmiyah & Wiyono, 2021). Therefore, learning is not confined to formal academic activities such as reading, writing, or completing assignments; rather, it is characterized by relatively permanent behavioral changes resulting from individuals' active interaction with their environment (Mayer, 2021; Schunk, 2020).

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The learning process begins in early childhood and occurs through various mechanisms, one of which is imitation (Makuro et al., 2025; Manullang et al., 2021). In the early stages of development, individuals acquire language and behavior through social interaction with parents and their surrounding environment. This process indicates that learning is a dynamic and continuous activity, marked by internal changes within an individual's cognitive structure (Jaboob et al., 2024; Yoon, 2017). To facilitate such changes, a variety of approaches, methods, and instructional strategies are required. Along with the development of human thought, numerous learning theories have been formulated, each possessing distinct characteristics, strengths, and limitations. Within psychology, the study of learning and instruction constitutes a central focus of cognitive psychology, which has made significant contributions to understanding variations in learning styles and students' thinking processes in educational contexts (Mayer, 2024; Sweller et al., 2019; Marhayati & Chandra, 2020).

Cognitive learning theory views learning as a complex mental process involving mechanisms such as schemas, assimilation, accommodation, and information processing (Chen et al., 2018; Schunk, 1989; Young et al., 2014). By understanding how individuals process, store, and utilize information, this theory provides a theoretical foundation for developing more effective and meaningful instructional strategies. From a cognitive perspective, instructional materials are regarded as essential components that must be systematically designed to enable learners to relate, organize, and comprehend information in depth. In addition, learning evaluation plays a crucial role in assessing students' levels of understanding and cognitive development throughout the learning process (Mayer, 2020; Sweller et al., 2019).

Furthermore, cognitive learning theory emphasizes the importance of the learning process rather than merely the final outcomes. The cognitivist approach rejects the notion that learning consists solely of a mechanical relationship between stimulus and response. Instead, individual behavior is understood as the result of perception, interpretation, and comprehension of situations related to learning goals. Consequently, internal mental processes become the primary determinants of how individuals learn and act (Mayer, 2021; Sweller et al., 2019).

From an Islamic perspective, the cognitivist approach aligns with the view that human beings are endowed with reason (*'aql*) to think, understand, and reflect upon reality as part of a holistic learning process. The Quran and Hadith explicitly encourage the use of reason and reflection (*tafakkur*) as means of acquiring knowledge and enhancing understanding (Htay et al., 2025; Jaafar et al., 2025). Accordingly, Islamic education is not solely oriented toward the transmission of knowledge but also toward the development of critical, analytical, and reflective thinking abilities that are aligned with spiritual and moral values. Nevertheless, while cognitivism tends to emphasize rational and intellectual aspects, the Islamic perspective complements it by incorporating spiritual awareness and the ultimate purpose of education as an act of devotion to Allah (Halstead, 2004; Sahin, 2018).

Numerous previous studies have examined cognitive learning theory, particularly in relation to its implementation in instructional practices. Several studies indicate that cognitive theory contributes to improving the quality of learning by enabling educators to better understand the processes of comprehension, information processing, and knowledge storage within learners (Kassymova et al., 2025; Mutiaramses et al., 2025). The application of cognitive learning theory has been shown to support the development of more effective instructional methods and to have a positive impact on students' learning outcomes (Sweller et al., 2019; Mayer, 2020).

However, based on the existing literature, most studies continue to examine

cognitive learning theory within the general context of instruction and have not specifically addressed it from the perspective of Islamic epistemology. Therefore, this study focuses on examining cognitive learning theory as proposed by key scholars and analyzing Islamic perspectives on the theory. This study also aims to explore the relevance, strengths, and limitations of cognitive learning theory from multiple perspectives, particularly within the framework of Islamic education.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using the content analysis method (Engkizar et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2019). This approach was selected because it allows for a systematic and in-depth examination and interpretation of meanings, concepts, and patterns of thought embedded in texts. Content analysis was applied to academic documents relevant to the research focus in order to identify, classify, and understand conceptual constructions related to Cognitive Learning Theory and Islamic perspectives (Kara, 2023; Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Özden, 2024; Preiser et al., 2021).

The data analysis process was conducted through several stages: i) determining units of analysis aligned with the research objectives; ii) conducting repeated and critical readings of the texts to identify key concepts and themes; iii) coding and categorizing data based on similarities in meaning and context; and iv) analytically interpreting the findings to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the relevance, strengths, and limitations of Cognitive Learning Theory within the framework of Islamic education. This content analysis approach enables the study to produce conceptual, reflective, and contextual findings consistent with the characteristics of qualitative research (Gergen, 2020; Langputeh et al., 2023; Pohontsch, 2019; Roller, 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Basic Concepts of Cognitive Learning Theory

The term cognitive is derived from the word cognition, which means knowing or acquiring knowledge. Conceptually, cognition refers to the mental processes involved in acquiring, organizing, and utilizing knowledge. Cognitive learning theory emphasizes that learning is not merely the result of a stimulus response relationship, but rather involves complex internal processes such as perception, comprehension, memory, and information processing. Therefore, this theory places greater emphasis on the learning process itself rather than solely on learning outcomes (Aryadoust, 2019; Maringanti & Sahu, 2024).

From the perspective of cognitive psychology, human behavior cannot be fully understood without considering the underlying mental processes. The cognitive approach asserts that observable behavior is a manifestation of internal processes, including intentions, motivation, perception, and individual interpretation of specific situations. Consequently, cognitive psychology serves as an important foundation in the development of educational psychology, as it provides a framework for understanding how learners actively think and learn (Wolters & Brady, 2021).

The diversity of perspectives in defining learning has led to the emergence of various learning theories. The development of cognitive theory was partly driven by dissatisfaction among psychologists with behaviorism, which was considered overly focused on external aspects of learning. Among the most influential learning theories in education are behaviorist and cognitive theories, each of which possesses distinct characteristics, strengths, and limitations (Hidayah, 2021).

Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

Jean Piaget is a central figure in the development of cognitive development theory. His theory is grounded in structuralism and constructivism. From a structural

perspective, Piaget viewed intelligence as a cognitive structure that develops through distinct stages. Meanwhile, the constructivist approach is reflected in his view that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment (Pakpahan & Saragih, 2022).

Piaget classified cognitive development into four main stages. The first is the sensorimotor stage (0–2 years), during which children learn through sensory and motor activities and begin to understand object permanence. The second is the preoperational stage (2–7 years), characterized by the use of symbols, and although children's thinking remains egocentric and intuitive. The third is the concrete operational stage (7–11 years), in which children begin to think logically about concrete objects and understand the concept of conservation. The fourth is the formal operational stage (11 years and above), which enables individuals to think abstractly, hypothetically, and systematically (Azzahra & Darmiyanti, 2024).

The implications of Piaget's theory for learning emphasize the importance of creating natural, contextual, and meaningful learning experiences that are relevant to students' lives. Learning does not need to be confined to formal classroom settings but can also utilize the surrounding environment as a source of learning. In addition, the use of varied instructional methods is essential to support students' cognitive development (Anidar, 2017).

Gestalt Cognitive Theory

Gestalt theory views learning as a process of gaining insight, or deep understanding, of the relationships among elements within a situation. Unlike behaviorism, which emphasizes trial and error, Gestalt theory argues that successful learning occurs when individuals are able to comprehend the overall structure of a problem. Insight enables learners to identify problems and discover effective solutions (Verstegen, 2025).

From the Gestalt perspective, individual behavior is based on cognition, namely the process of recognizing and interpreting the situation in which the behavior occurs. Meaningful learning is achieved when learners perceive objects or phenomena as an integrated whole rather than as isolated parts (Muhajirah, 2020).

The application of Gestalt theory in learning involves several key principles, including insight learning, meaningful learning, goal-oriented behavior, the life space principle that connects learning with learners' real-life environments, and the transfer of learning from one situation to another (Guo et al., 2025).

Jerome S. Bruner's Cognitive Theory

Jerome S. Bruner developed a cognitive learning theory grounded in constructivism. His theory was influenced by the ideas of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, emphasizing that learners actively construct new knowledge based on their prior experiences and existing knowledge. According to Bruner, the learning process involves information transformation, hypothesis formation, and decision-making (Metsämuuronen & Räsänen, 2018).

Bruner proposed three modes of representation in learning: enactive, iconic, and symbolic. In the enactive mode, knowledge is acquired through physical activity and direct experience. The iconic mode is characterized by the use of visual representations, while the symbolic mode involves the use of language and abstract symbols such as mathematics (Taylor, 1984).

Bruner's theory emphasizes the importance of discovery learning. Learning becomes more effective and creative when learners are given opportunities to discover concepts and principles through concrete examples that represent the rules or ideas being studied (Ni'amah & M, 2021).

David Ausubel's Cognitive Theory

David Ausubel introduced the concept of meaningful learning. According to Ausubel, learning becomes effective when new information can be assimilated into

the learner's existing cognitive structure. He distinguished between meaningful learning and rote learning, where meaningful learning involves deep conceptual understanding, whereas rote learning tends to be mechanical (Bryce & Blown, 2024).

Meaningful learning is influenced by an individual's cognitive structure, including the clarity, stability, and organization of existing knowledge. For meaningful learning to occur, learning materials must be potentially meaningful, and learners must possess both readiness and motivation to engage in meaningful learning (Katagall et al., 2015).

The success of meaningful learning also requires teachers to possess the competence to organize learning materials logically, systematically, and clearly, while linking new content to students' existing cognitive structures (Nugraha & Husni, 2020).

Robert M. Gagné's Cognitive Theory

Robert M. Gagné viewed learning as a relatively permanent change in human capability that is not solely attributable to biological growth. He emphasized that learning results from the interaction between an individual's internal conditions and the external conditions of the environment (Brayadi et al., 2022). Gagné's theory integrates behaviorist and cognitive approaches through an information-processing framework. He proposed that effective instruction requires the systematic organization of external conditions in the form of nine instructional events designed to facilitate learning (Engkizar et al., 2023; Herdiansyah et al., 2024; Nandi et al., 2012).

Furthermore, Gagné identified eight phases within a single learning act, ranging from motivation, apprehension, acquisition, retention, recall, generalization, performance, to feedback. Each phase represents the interaction between internal cognitive processes and external stimuli experienced by learners during the learning process (Al-Mahiroh & Suyadi, 2020).

Islamic Perspectives on Cognitive Learning Theory

From an Islamic perspective, learning is regarded as a fundamental activity that has existed since the creation of humankind. This is reflected in the story of Prophet Adam (peace be upon him), when Allah taught him the names of all things along with their forms and characteristics, and then commanded him to demonstrate this knowledge before the angels. This event illustrates that learning in Islam involves cognitive processes such as comprehension, memory, and the reproduction of knowledge. In addition, the learning process is also depicted in the story of Adam's son, Qabil, who acquired knowledge of how to bury a corpse through observation and imitation of a crow's behavior. This narrative emphasizes that learning can occur through empirical experience and imitation, which aligns with cognitive learning concepts based on observation and meaning-making (Nasution et al., 2023).

Islam views learning as a holistic process that integrates reason (*'aql*), the heart (*qalb*), and the spirit (*ruh*). The Quran consistently encourages humans to think, reflect, and understand reality as part of the pursuit of knowledge (Engkizar et al., 2024; Engkizar et al., 2025). This indicates that Islam places significant emphasis on internal mental processes, which constitute the core principles of cognitive learning theory. The command to learn is explicitly stated in the first revealed verses, QS. Al-'Alaq (1–5), which begin with the injunction *iqra'* (read). This command affirms that cognitive activity is the primary foundation for the development of human knowledge.

The meaning of *iqra'* in QS. Al-'Alaq extends beyond the literal act of reading written texts; it encompasses processes of inquiry, examination, reflection, and the construction of meaning from all phenomena in the universe. Accordingly, reading in Islam represents a complex and continuous cognitive process involving information processing, deep reflection, and the internalization of values. The Quran also

repeatedly employs terms such as *yatafakkarun* (to think), *ya'qilun* (to reason), and *yatadabbarun* (to contemplate deeply), underscoring the central role of mental activity in learning and the pursuit of truth (Ruby, 2019).

This Islamic emphasis on thinking processes is consistent with cognitive learning theory, which prioritizes learning processes over mere learning outcomes. In the context of Islamic education, religious values are not transmitted solely through verbal instruction; rather, they must be rationally understood, critically processed, and internalized by learners so that they can be actualized in daily life. Consequently, Islamic learning requires the active engagement of the cognitive domain as the foundation for the formation of holistic human character (Nasution et al., 2023).

This perspective is further reinforced by the views of classical Muslim scholars. Al-Ghazali asserted that reason is the primary instrument for acquiring knowledge, while the heart serves as the receptacle for the illumination of knowledge. This concept indicates that learning involves active and reflective mental processes, which align with the fundamental principles of cognitive theory (Isa et al., 2022). Similarly, Ibn Khaldun, in *al-Muqaddimah*, explained that learning occurs through gradual stages of intellectual development in accordance with learners' readiness and experiences. This view closely parallels Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which posits that human thinking abilities develop progressively with age and interaction with the environment (Babullah, 2022; Pakpahan & Saragih, 2022).

Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that the fundamental principles of cognitive learning theory exhibit strong alignment with Islamic perspectives on learning and education. Indeed, cognitive concepts such as the use of reason, reflection, gradual understanding, and the internalization of meaning have been integral to Islamic teachings long before cognitive theory emerged in modern psychological discourse. Therefore, the integration of cognitive learning theory with Islamic perspectives has the potential to enrich the development of learning models that are not only rational and scientific but also imbued with spiritual and moral values.

From an Islamic perspective, cognitive theory demonstrates relevance, strengths, as well as certain limitations across several dimensions.

First, human beings are viewed as holistic entities rather than merely biological or mental beings. In Islamic thought, humans are not composed solely of the body or the brain but also possess a soul (*ruh*), conscience, desires (*nafs*), moral awareness, and spirituality. Therefore, a cognitive approach that focuses exclusively on mental processes is considered insufficient if it fails to account for spiritual and moral dimensions (Pearce et al., 2018).

Second, cognitive theory can be integrated with spiritual values and faith (*iman*). Several studies indicate that processes of thinking, understanding, and internalizing religious teachings cannot be separated from spiritual awareness. In this sense, cognitive processes in Islam involve not only reason but also emotions, conscience, faith, and moral consciousness, rather than merely the acquisition of information or knowledge (Chaer et al., 2021).

Third, cognitive theory can be Islamized and adapted to Islamic values. There have been scholarly efforts to critically examine modern cognitive learning theories and align them with Islamic values, paradigms, and philosophical foundations. Such efforts include studies that integrate cognitive theory with perspectives derived from the Quran and Hadith, as well as spiritual and moral dimensions of learning (Asyibli et al., 2025; Thayyibi & Ratnasari, 2022).

Fourth, Islamic psychology has a longstanding tradition of understanding mental aspects and psychological well-being long before the emergence of modern psychology. For example, classical Muslim scholars such as Abu Zayd al-Balkhi in the ninth century developed theories of mental health that emphasized the balance

between the soul and the body and employed cognitive approaches to psychological well-being, including the roles of thought, emotion, and awareness, centuries before modern psychological science evolved (Istikhari, 2021).

Fifth, cognitive theory plays an important role in religious education. In educational contexts, cognitive theory is considered relevant for helping learners understand and internalize religious teachings in a reflective manner, rather than through rote memorization or ritual practice alone. By actively engaging in cognitive processes to comprehend meaning, conceptual relationships, and moral and ethical values, religious understanding can become deeper and more meaningful (Elliott et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that Cognitive Learning Theory conceptualizes learning as an internal mental process that emphasizes the active role of the intellect in constructing, organizing, and reconstructing knowledge. The perspectives of major cognitive theorists such as Piaget, Gestalt, Bruner, Ausubel, and Gagne demonstrate that effective learning occurs when learners are actively engaged in processes of thinking, meaning-making, and understanding, rather than merely receiving information passively.

From an Islamic perspective, these findings indicate a fundamental alignment between cognitive learning theory and the concept of Islamic education, particularly in their shared emphasis on the use of reason and reflective processes in the acquisition of knowledge. Nevertheless, Islam views human beings as holistic entities who are not defined solely by rational capacities but also encompass spiritual, moral, and ethical dimensions. Therefore, although cognitive learning theory is relevant for explaining mechanisms of thinking and understanding, it does not fully capture the comprehensive dimensions of humanity as understood in Islam. Accordingly, the integration of cognitive learning theory with the values of Islamic education has the potential to enrich the development of learning models that are oriented not only toward the mastery of knowledge but also toward the cultivation of faith, moral character, and the holistic development of learners' personalities.

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