



Research Article

## Criterion-Referenced Assessment for Strengthening Critical Thinking in Islamic Education

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### Criterion-Referenced Assessment for Strengthening Critical Thinking in Islamic Education

**Abstract.** This study examines the role of criterion-referenced assessment in strengthening critical thinking skills in Islamic Education. The study is motivated by the dominance of memorization-oriented assessment practices that limit students' analytical and reflective abilities. Previous studies have discussed authentic assessment and higher-order thinking skills, yet limited attention has been given to criterion-referenced assessment as a framework for developing critical thinking in Islamic Education. This research employed a qualitative approach using library research methods. Data were collected from books, journal articles, and academic publications issued within the last ten years and analyzed through content analysis. The findings indicate that criterion-referenced assessment supports critical thinking development through competency-based evaluation, analytical learning

tasks, reflective learning processes, and measurable learning indicators. The analysis further reveals that students' critical thinking is strengthened when assessment emphasizes mastery of learning criteria, evidence-based reasoning, and continuous feedback rather than comparison with peers. Furthermore, this assessment approach encourages a shift from score-oriented evaluation toward competency and reasoning-based assessment in Islamic Education. The study concludes that criterion-referenced assessment provides an innovative framework for strengthening critical thinking and supporting 21st-century learning competencies.

**Keywords:** Criterion-Referenced Assessment, Critical Thinking, Islamic Education, Learning Evaluation, HOTS

## INTRODUCTION

The transformation of 21st-century education has encouraged learning systems to emphasize higher-order thinking skills, particularly critical thinking, as an essential competency in contemporary education. In the context of Islamic Education, learning is no longer oriented merely toward the transfer of religious knowledge and memorization of doctrinal materials, but also toward the development of analytical, reflective, and problem-solving abilities. Critical thinking in Islamic Education plays a strategic role in helping students understand religious teachings contextually, respond to social changes wisely, and develop rational attitudes grounded in Islamic values (Salleh et al., 2020, p. 521; Trinova et al., 2020, p. 86). Accordingly, Islamic Education assessment should shift from score-oriented evaluation toward competency-based assessment that measures reasoning and analytical abilities.

Recent studies have discussed various approaches to learning evaluation in Islamic Education, including authentic assessment, higher-order thinking skills (HOTS)-based learning, competency-oriented assessment, and reflective learning evaluation. Several researchers emphasized that assessment practices in Islamic Education remain dominated by memorization-based testing and cognitive measurement, which often fail to develop students' critical reasoning abilities (Abdul Kadir & Kharis Sulaiman Hasri, 2021, p. 99; Ghufuran Hasyim Achmad & Andi Prastowo, 2022, p. 78). Other studies highlighted the importance of integrating HOTS into Islamic Education learning processes to support 21st-century competencies. Nevertheless, previous research has primarily focused on instructional strategies and curriculum implementation. At the same time, limited attention has been devoted to criterion-referenced assessment as a conceptual and practical framework for strengthening critical thinking within Islamic Education evaluation systems (Darun Mutammimah, 2026, p. 151; Rosmiati Ramli, 2026, p. 859).

Criterion-referenced assessment is an evaluation approach that measures students' achievement against predetermined competencies and learning indicators rather than comparisons among learners. This assessment model emphasizes mastery learning, measurable competencies, analytical performance, and reflective achievement processes. In educational theory, criterion-referenced assessment is considered more effective in encouraging meaningful learning because it positions

assessment as part of the learning process rather than merely an instrument for grading outcomes (Darmawan, 2024, p. 122; Nilna Fadlillah & Kusaeri, 2024, p. 660). In the context of Islamic Education, this approach is relevant to competency-based learning principles that seek to integrate cognitive, affective, and reflective dimensions of religious understanding. Therefore, criterion-referenced assessment has the potential to strengthen students' critical thinking through analytical tasks, reflective evaluation, contextual problem-solving, and competency-oriented learning achievement (Mulyani et al., 2024, p. 253).

Despite its theoretical relevance, studies specifically examining the relationship between criterion-referenced assessment and critical thinking in Islamic Education remain limited. Existing discussions tend to separate assessment theory from the development of critical thinking competencies. This condition indicates a theoretical gap concerning how criterion-referenced assessment can function not only as an evaluation instrument but also as a pedagogical framework for strengthening critical thinking skills in Islamic Education. Furthermore, few studies have attempted to reconstruct Islamic Education evaluation systems through competency-based and reasoning-oriented assessment models (Isnaini & Jannah, 2024, p. 338; Muttaqin et al., 2025, p. 79). This article addresses the gap by positioning criterion-referenced assessment as an innovative framework capable of transforming Islamic Education evaluation toward more analytical, reflective, and competency-oriented learning practices.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze the role of criterion-referenced assessment in strengthening critical thinking skills within Islamic Education. The study also seeks to formulate a conceptual framework for reconstructing Islamic Education evaluation based on competency-oriented assessment principles. The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the discourse of Islamic Education evaluation and practically to the development of more adaptive, reflective, and transformative assessment systems in the era of 21st-century learning and educational digitalization.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using library research. The research focused on examining and analyzing various academic sources related to criterion-referenced assessment, critical thinking skills, and Islamic Education evaluation. The study did not involve direct field participants; instead, the primary data sources consisted of scientific journal articles, books, conference proceedings, and academic publications relevant to the topic. To ensure the relevance and credibility of the analysis, the selected references were limited to reputable publications issued within the last ten years and closely related to Islamic Education, learning evaluation, competency-based assessment, and higher-order thinking skills.

The data collection procedure was conducted through systematic literature identification, selection, classification, and documentation. The collected materials were then analyzed using content analysis techniques involving data reduction, categorization, interpretation, and conceptual synthesis. The analysis emphasized identifying theoretical patterns, conceptual relationships, and practical implications

concerning the role of criterion-referenced assessment in strengthening critical thinking within Islamic Education. Furthermore, the study employed a comparative and interpretative approach to formulate a competency-oriented framework for competency-oriented assessment in Islamic Education.

To maintain the validity of the findings, the study applied source triangulation by comparing various scholarly perspectives from different academic publications. The analytical process was conducted continuously to ensure consistency between theoretical concepts, previous research findings, and the objectives of the study. Through this method, the research aimed to produce a comprehensive conceptual understanding of criterion-referenced assessment as an innovative framework for developing critical thinking skills in Islamic Education.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Contemporary developments in education have encouraged Islamic Education to transform its evaluation system from conventional assessment practices toward competency-oriented learning evaluation. Assessment in Islamic Education is no longer positioned merely as an instrument for measuring students' cognitive achievement, but also as a strategic framework for developing analytical, reflective, and critical thinking skills. In this context, criterion-referenced assessment offers an alternative evaluation approach that emphasizes mastery of competencies, measurable learning indicators, and meaningful learning processes. The discussion in this section is divided into four major themes, namely the transformation of assessment paradigms in Islamic Education, the conceptual foundations of criterion-referenced assessment, the role of criterion-referenced assessment in strengthening critical thinking skills, and the reconstruction of Islamic Education evaluation in the era of 21st-century learning. These discussions are intended to formulate a more adaptive, transformative, and competency-based evaluation framework within Islamic Education.

### **The Transformation of Assessment Paradigms in Islamic Education**

Educational practices in Islamic Education have traditionally emphasized memorization, numerical achievement, and teacher-centered evaluation. The analysis in this study indicates that these assessment patterns primarily measure students' ability to recall religious material rather than their capacity to analyze, interpret, and contextualize Islamic values in contemporary life. As a result, evaluation systems often fail to support the development of critical reasoning and reflective understanding among learners. This condition demonstrates that conventional assessment approaches remain insufficient for addressing the demands of 21st-century education.

Current educational transformation has shifted the orientation of learning evaluation toward competency-based assessment that prioritizes measurable skills, meaningful learning processes, and analytical abilities. Within Islamic Education, assessment is increasingly expected to function not merely as a grading mechanism but also as an instrument for facilitating intellectual and moral development. This study found that competency-oriented evaluation encourages students to engage

more actively in reflective thinking, problem-solving, and contextual understanding of Islamic teachings. Such transformation reflects a broader movement from outcome-centered evaluation toward process-oriented learning assessment (Rahmah et al., 2026, p. 239).

The findings further suggest that the transformation of assessment paradigms in Islamic Education requires clear alignment between learning objectives, instructional activities, and evaluation criteria. Such alignment ensures that assessment consistently measures the competencies expected from students while encouraging active participation, reflective inquiry, and evidence-based reasoning throughout the learning process. Consequently, assessment serves not only to evaluate learning outcomes but also to support continuous learning improvement in accordance with the principles of competency-based Islamic Education.

A significant change identified in this study involves the growing relevance of assessment models that integrate cognitive, affective, and reflective dimensions simultaneously. Traditional evaluation practices frequently separate these dimensions, resulting in fragmented learning outcomes that emphasize factual mastery over conceptual understanding. In contrast, transformative assessment paradigms promote holistic learning experiences by connecting knowledge acquisition with reasoning abilities and ethical reflection (Adzidzah & Yudiawan, 2024, p. 112). This approach strengthens students' capacity to interpret religious concepts critically while maintaining alignment with Islamic educational values.

Greater attention to analytical learning processes has also increased the urgency of reconstructing evaluation systems in Islamic Education. The study demonstrates that assessment transformation is necessary to respond to digital learning environments, educational innovation, and the increasing demand for higher-order thinking skills. Consequently, Islamic Education requires adaptive evaluation frameworks capable of fostering critical thinking, reflective reasoning, and competency mastery (Ahmad et al., 2020, p. 196; Umah, 2025, p. 48). Through this transformation, assessment becomes an integral component of meaningful learning rather than a mere instrument for measuring academic performance.

### **Conceptual Foundations of Criterion-Referenced Assessment in Islamic Education**

Criterion-referenced assessment is fundamentally designed to evaluate students' learning achievement based on predetermined competencies and measurable learning standards. The analysis in this study reveals that this assessment approach differs significantly from norm-referenced evaluation, which primarily compares students' performance with that of other learners. In Islamic Education, criterion-referenced assessment emphasizes mastery of learning objectives, conceptual understanding, and competency attainment rather than numerical ranking. This orientation enables assessment to function more objectively and constructively in measuring students' intellectual and reflective development (Black & Wiliam, 2021, p. 559; Darmawan, 2024, p. 123).

A key characteristic of criterion-referenced assessment is its ability to establish a clear relationship between expected learning outcomes and assessment practices in

Islamic Education. By defining explicit performance criteria before the learning process begins, teachers are able to design evaluation activities that consistently reflect instructional objectives and competency standards. This systematic alignment enhances the transparency, fairness, and educational value of assessment while supporting students' continuous development throughout the learning process. Furthermore, clearly defined assessment criteria enable both teachers and students to understand the expected level of competency achievement more effectively. This clarity reduces subjectivity in the evaluation process and encourages students to focus on mastering learning objectives rather than competing with their peers. As a result, assessment becomes a meaningful component of the learning process that supports continuous improvement, self-reflection, and competency development in Islamic Education.

Competency-based evaluation constitutes one of the primary foundations of criterion-referenced assessment in Islamic Education. The findings indicate that competency-oriented assessment allows teachers to identify students' abilities more comprehensively through clearly formulated learning indicators. Such an approach supports the integration of analytical thinking, reflective reasoning, and contextual understanding within the learning process. Consequently, assessment activities become closely connected to students' actual mastery of Islamic concepts and values instead of focusing solely on memorization outcomes (Irmayanti et al., 2024, p. 17).

Mastery learning principles also play a significant role in strengthening the relevance of criterion-referenced assessment within Islamic Education. This study demonstrates that learning evaluation becomes more meaningful when students are provided with opportunities to achieve specific competencies through continuous feedback and reflective learning experiences. Assessment is therefore positioned not only as an instrument for determining academic achievement but also as a process that guides students toward deeper understanding and self-improvement. Through measurable criteria, learners can recognize their strengths and limitations more clearly, which contributes to the development of independent and reflective learning attitudes (Fatmawati, 2025, p. 116; Irmayanti et al., 2024, p. 19).

Integration of cognitive, affective, and reflective dimensions represents another important conceptual foundation identified in this study. Islamic Education requires assessment systems capable of evaluating not only intellectual mastery but also attitudes, ethical awareness, and critical reflection grounded in Islamic values (Nida et al., 2025, p. 16). Criterion-referenced assessment supports this holistic orientation by enabling teachers to design evaluation instruments that measure reasoning abilities alongside moral and spiritual development. Such integration demonstrates that assessment in Islamic Education can serve as a transformative framework for developing balanced competencies that align with both educational objectives and Islamic principles.

### **Criterion-Referenced Assessment for Strengthening Critical Thinking Skills**

Analytical learning processes in Islamic Education require assessment systems capable of encouraging students to interpret, evaluate, and respond critically to various religious and social issues. The results of this study indicate that criterion-

referenced assessment contributes significantly to the development of critical thinking skills because evaluation activities are directed toward competency mastery rather than simple factual recall. Through clearly formulated learning indicators, students are encouraged to construct arguments, analyze problems contextually, and demonstrate reasoning abilities based on Islamic values (Braun et al., 2020, p. 156). This approach creates learning environments that promote intellectual engagement and reflective understanding.

Reflective assessment practices were also identified as an important component in strengthening students' critical thinking capacities. Evaluation activities designed through criterion-referenced principles provide opportunities for learners to review their understanding, identify conceptual weaknesses, and improve their reasoning processes continuously. In Islamic Education, reflective learning encourages students not only to understand religious teachings textually but also to interpret them critically within contemporary contexts. Such processes support the formation of analytical attitudes and deeper conceptual comprehension among learners (Fatmawati, 2025, p. 111; Mulyani et al., 2024, p. 253).

An equally important aspect of criterion-referenced assessment is its capacity to encourage students to justify their ideas through logical and evidence-based reasoning. Because evaluation is guided by explicit performance criteria, learners are expected not only to provide correct answers but also to explain, evaluate, and defend their arguments systematically. Such assessment practices foster deeper conceptual understanding while strengthening students' ability to distinguish between factual information, interpretation, and reasoned judgment within the context of Islamic Education.

Contextual problem-solving emerged as another significant finding in this study. Criterion-referenced assessment enables teachers to design evaluation tasks that relate Islamic concepts to real-life social challenges, ethical dilemmas, and contemporary educational issues. As a result, students become more capable of connecting theoretical knowledge with practical application through logical analysis and evidence-based reasoning. This condition demonstrates that competency-oriented assessment can strengthen students' higher-order thinking skills while simultaneously enhancing the relevance of Islamic Education to modern social realities (Kurjum et al., 2020, p. 149; Nida et al., 2025, p. 13).

Another important implication of criterion-referenced assessment is its contribution to the development of self-regulated and reflective learning. Clearly defined assessment criteria enable students to monitor their own learning progress, recognize areas requiring improvement, and take greater responsibility for achieving expected competencies. This continuous process of self-evaluation supports metacognitive awareness and encourages learners to refine their reasoning strategies, thereby strengthening critical thinking as an integral part of lifelong learning in Islamic Education.

Greater emphasis on reasoning abilities and higher-order thinking skills further demonstrates the transformative potential of criterion-referenced assessment in Islamic Education. The study found that competency-based evaluation encourages students to engage actively in analytical discussion, interpretation, and reflective

argumentation instead of depending solely on memorization-oriented learning (Fikri et al., 2026, p. 1394; Purnamasari et al., 2026, p. 8). Consequently, assessment functions not merely as a measurement instrument but also as a pedagogical strategy for developing critical, adaptive, and reflective learners. Such transformation is essential for preparing students to respond effectively to the intellectual and social challenges of the 21st-century learning era.

### **Reconstruction of Islamic Education Evaluation in the Era of 21st-Century Learning**

Rapid developments in digital technology and contemporary educational transformation have increased the urgency of reconstructing evaluation systems in Islamic Education. The results of this study indicate that conventional assessment practices are no longer fully capable of addressing the demands of 21st-century learning, which emphasize critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and digital literacy. In this context, criterion-referenced assessment offers a more adaptive framework because it focuses on competency mastery, analytical performance, and reflective learning processes (Pratiwi et al., 2026, p. 59; Trinova et al., 2020, p. 84). Such transformation positions assessment as an integral component of meaningful learning rather than merely a mechanism for determining academic scores.

Reconstructing Islamic Education evaluation also requires a stronger alignment between curriculum objectives, learning activities, and assessment practices. Criterion-referenced assessment provides this alignment by ensuring that evaluation criteria are directly linked to the competencies expected from students. As a result, assessment becomes an integral part of the instructional process, enabling teachers to evaluate not only learning outcomes but also students' progress toward achieving predetermined educational goals in a consistent and meaningful manner.

Integration of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) within Islamic Education evaluation emerged as one of the major characteristics of reconstructive assessment practices. The analysis demonstrates that competency-oriented evaluation encourages students to engage in interpretation, contextual reasoning, argumentation, and reflective problem-solving based on Islamic values. This condition strengthens students' intellectual independence and analytical abilities while simultaneously supporting the development of ethical awareness (Putri & Setiawan, 2022, p. 179; Rosidin et al., 2020, p. 31). Through criterion-referenced assessment, evaluation activities become more aligned with the objectives of contemporary Islamic Education, which seeks to balance intellectual, moral, and reflective competencies.

Another essential element of reconstructive evaluation is the shift from assessment of learning toward assessment for learning. Within a criterion-referenced framework, continuous feedback enables students to recognize their strengths, identify learning gaps, and improve their performance throughout the instructional process. Such formative assessment practices encourage active participation, reflective learning, and continuous competency development, making assessment an

important catalyst for meaningful learning rather than merely a tool for assigning grades.

Digital learning environments also contribute significantly to the reconstruction of Islamic Education evaluation systems. The study found that technology-based learning enables more flexible, interactive, and measurable assessment processes through digital platforms, online reflective tasks, collaborative learning activities, and competency-based feedback systems. Consequently, assessment can be conducted continuously and comprehensively, allowing teachers to monitor students' cognitive and reflective progress more effectively (Pratiwi et al., 2026, p. 63). This transformation demonstrates that criterion-referenced assessment is highly relevant for supporting innovative and technology-integrated Islamic Education learning systems.

The successful implementation of reconstructed evaluation systems also depends on the changing role of teachers in Islamic Education. Rather than functioning solely as evaluators, teachers are expected to become facilitators who design authentic assessment tasks, provide constructive feedback, and guide students in achieving predetermined competencies. This expanded role supports the development of independent, reflective, and critical learners while ensuring that assessment practices remain aligned with the objectives of 21st-century education and the values of Islamic Education.

The reconstructive framework formulated in this study emphasizes the integration of competency-based assessment, HOTS-oriented evaluation, reflective learning, and digital educational innovation. The following table illustrates the transformation of Islamic Education evaluation from conventional assessment practices toward criterion-referenced and 21st-century competency-oriented evaluation systems (Fadillah & Yunus, 2024, p. 21; Wildan, 2022, p. 18).

Table 1. Reconstruction of Islamic Education Evaluation through Criterion-Referenced Assessment

| <b>Evaluation Aspect</b> | <b>Conventional Evaluation</b>               | <b>Criterion-Referenced and 21<sup>st</sup> Century-Oriented Evaluation</b> |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Assessment Orientation   | Memorization and score-oriented assessment   | Competency, reasoning, and mastery-oriented assessment                      |
| Learning Focus           | Emphasis on final academic scores            | Emphasis on competency achievement and learning processes                   |
| Teacher's Role           | Teacher-centered evaluation                  | Facilitator of reflective and competency-based learning                     |
| Learning Activities      | Limited analytical and reflective activities | HOTS, contextual problemsolving, and analytical tasks                       |
| Assessment System        | Static and paper-based evaluation            | Digital, interactive, and continuous assessment                             |

| Measurement Standard | Comparison among students        | Achievement based on predetermined criteria                    |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Learning Dimensions  | Dominantly cognitive evaluation  | Integration of cognitive, affective, and reflective dimensions |
| Evaluation Function  | Evaluation as a measurement tool | Evaluation as a meaningful and transformative learning process |

The transformation presented in the table demonstrates that criterion-referenced assessment provides a strategic framework for reconstructing Islamic Education evaluation in response to the demands of 21st-century learning. Through this approach, assessment not only measures learning outcomes but also contributes to the development of critical, adaptive, reflective, and competency-oriented learners capable of responding to contemporary educational and social challenges.

## CONCLUSION

Criterion-referenced assessment provides a transformative framework for strengthening critical thinking skills in Islamic Education. The study demonstrates that conventional evaluation practices, which are predominantly oriented toward memorization and numerical achievement, are no longer adequate for addressing the demands of 21st-century learning. In contrast, criterion-referenced assessment emphasizes competency mastery, analytical reasoning, reflective learning processes, and measurable learning indicators that support the development of higher-order thinking skills within Islamic Education contexts.

The analysis further reveals that criterion-referenced assessment contributes significantly to the reconstruction of Islamic Education evaluation systems through the integration of cognitive, affective, and reflective dimensions. This approach encourages students to engage in contextual problem-solving, reflective interpretation, and evidence-based reasoning grounded in Islamic values. In addition, competency-oriented assessment supports more meaningful learning experiences by positioning evaluation not merely as a grading mechanism but also as a pedagogical strategy for intellectual and moral development.

Digital educational transformation and the increasing importance of HOTS-based learning also strengthen the relevance of criterion-referenced assessment in contemporary Islamic Education. Through adaptive, reflective, and competency-based evaluation systems, Islamic Education can respond more effectively to technological developments, educational innovation, and the complexity of modern social challenges. Therefore, criterion-referenced assessment can serve as an innovative and strategic model for reconstructing Islamic Education evaluation in the era of 21st-century learning.

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