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Learning English (and Arabic) in Malaysian Islamic Schools: Language Use and the Construction of Identities

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Abstract

The Malaysian schooling system celebrates the diversity of Malaysian ethnic groups by allowing different school types to co-exist since the independence of the Federation of Malaya (now Malaysia) from British colonial rule in 1957. Whilst ideologically young Malaysians can pick and choose where they want to learn, these schools are clustered around ethnicity, language and even religion. Only the majority national schools (or *sekolah kebangsaan*) reflect the diversity of the ideological Malaysian 'race' (or *bangsa Malaysia*). For national type schools (or *sekolah jenis kebangsaan*), these are almost exclusively subscribed by Tamil speaking students who are mostly Indians or by Mandarin speaking students who are mostly Chinese. The focus of this empirical paper is on a final school type, national religious schools (or *sekolah kebangsaan agama*), that represents the religious ideology of the Malaysian majority race, the Malay-Muslims. These are primary and secondary 'Islamic schools' that place heavy emphasis on Islamic education often through the medium of Arabic, for the Malay-Muslim majority in Malaysia. This paper focuses on the lived experiences of 30 first year university undergraduates who completed five to six years of secondary education in national religious schools. Data were collected from periodic focus group discussions and also written narrative 'reflections' of their Islamic school days with three cohorts of selected undergraduates from March 2016 to May 2017 at two university campuses in northern Malaysia. The stories they shared draw attention to how English, and to an extent Arabic language, influenced their school-based learning experiences and constructed their identities.

Keywords: identity construction, Islamic schools, language use, Malaysian education, qualitative data

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Malaysian education and the national schooling system

The school system is undoubtedly the most important component of the formal education process (Hefner, 2007). Through the school system, the government and members of society can pool their resources to propel a nation towards economic, political and social progress by investing in the potential abilities of the younger generation (Adnan & Smith, 2001). Not only that, the school system plays a critical role as both purveyor and transmitter of positive values to the younger generation (Zaman, 2007). For a pluralistic nation like Malaysia, the role of the school system becomes even more noteworthy because Malaysian schools need to fulfil the needs and wants of the younger generation regardless of religion, ethnicity and social customs (Adnan, 2001, 2012). It is due to this diversity in the multi-ethnic fabric that is Malaysian society that the Malaysian education system has undergone several policy changes throughout the years to meet the demands of major stakeholders within the system. Ever since the Federation of Malaya (now Malaysia) became independent from British colonial rule in 1957, changes in education policy have brought forward parallel changes in attitude, mindset and perception of members of Malaysian society (Harper, 1999).

These changes are the result of a national schooling system that is, by and large, clustered based on ethnicity, language and even religion (Koh, 2017). 60 years after independence from colonial rule, only the Malaysian mixed national schools (or *sekolah kebangsaan*) reflect the aspirations of the government to create a single Malaysian race (or *bangsa Malaysia*) (Adnan, 2017). The picture is quite the opposite in national type schools (or *sekolah jenis kebangsaan*). These schools are almost exclusively attended by Tamil speaking students who are mostly Malaysian Indians or by Mandarin speaking students who are mostly Malaysian Chinese. In another type of school, nearly if not all students come from the majority Malaysian race: the *Bumiputera* Malays, who are also devout followers of Islam. Islam is the official religion of the Federation of Malaysia as outlined in the Malaysian Federal Constitution. This final school type, national religious schools (or *sekolah kebangsaan agama*), represents the religious principles and spiritual aspirations of the Malaysian majority race, who also commonly view themselves as ‘Malay-Muslims’ (Ilias & Adnan, 2014; Mohd-Asraf, 2005; Rosnani, 1996, 2014).

For the *Bumiputera* (or literally ‘sons and daughters of the earth’) Malay-Muslims, access to religious education through the Islamic school system is not just a privilege but also a necessity to maintain the status quo (Ahmad Kilani, 2003; Ahmad Zabidi, 2005). Indeed, Islamic schools have been the focus of many researchers who are interested in the complex interweaving nexus between ethnicity, religion and language within the Malaysian educational and socio-political contexts (see, for example, Ilias & Adnan, 2014; Mohd-Asraf, 2004, 2005; Rosnani, 1996, 2014). In today’s Malaysia, Islamic schools “incorporate both core academic subjects and Islamic religious subjects within the formal primary and secondary curriculums for the *Bumiputera* Malay majority” (Adnan, 2017, p. 221). The Malaysian government also introduced an A-Level equivalent of Islamic schooling certification dubbed the Malaysian Higher Certificate in Islamic Education (or *Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia – STAM*). STAM is a post-secondary certificate that focuses on branches of Islamic theology and Arabic language and is becoming a popular choice amongst Malay-Muslim students (New Straits Times, 2017). With STAM, Islamic school leavers can continue studying Islamic revealed knowledge, jurisprudence or other branches of Islam at university level.

Despite the above, not all students who complete their education in Islamic schools are compelled to deepen their religious knowledge at tertiary level. As a result, there are also those who complete their Islamic-styled education in such schools but these students continue their tertiary education in typical tertiary fields such as accountancy, architecture, computer science and even more diverse fields like business management, fine arts and medicine. Viewed in this light, Islamic schooling in Malaysia should not perhaps be compared to conservative ‘Madrassa’ education which is prevalent in third world Muslim countries in the African continent and the Middle East (Abu-Nimer & Nasser, 2017; Lo & Haron, 2016); Malaysian Islamic schools are perhaps more affiliated to mainstream national schools except with an equal concentration on religious education other than just conventional academic subjects. Another distinguishing marker of Islamic schooling in Malaysia is its substantial emphasis on Arabic language as a means to access religious knowledge as the next subsection will elucidate (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2014).

Learning Malay, English and Arabic language in Islamic schools

Given that all Islamic schools must subscribe to the national primary and secondary curriculum and teach prescribed subjects as stipulated by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, students in Islamic schools are in a unique position to be able to learn and use three languages: Malay or Bahasa Melayu as their mother tongue, English as a second language, and Arabic as an additional language. The *Bumiputera* Malays are protective of their language and so within the Malay community, particularly in rural areas, “those who use other languages (like English), are not just non-Malay but possibly non-Muslim” (Adnan, 2005, p. 3). Malay language is simultaneously a lingua franca that is understood by almost all Malaysians and it plays a critical role “towards the creation of a Malaysian identity” (Adnan & Smith, 2001, p. 330). So, even in Islamic schools it could be argued that Malay language plays a significant role not just within the classroom but also as a common language for day-to-day interactions. The figure below depicts the centrality of language as part of Malay identity and ‘Malayness’.

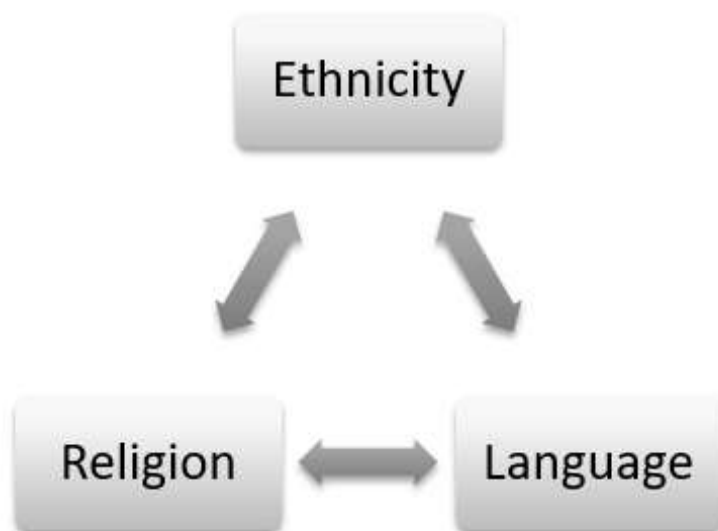


Figure 1: Ethnicity, religion and language as the tri-cores of ‘Malayness’

This figure illustrates that a Malay person “is naturally (normally) defined by ethnicity, religion and language. It is through these constructs that her or his *Malayness* is expressed through interactions with others, and projected through the way that person navigates the immediate environment” (Adnan, 2013b, p. 6). Rajadurai (2011) further defines this relationship between Malay ethnicity, Islamic religion and Malay language as the “essential identity” (p. 36) of the *Bumiputeras*. No matter which social sphere a Malay person enters, be it school or workplace, he or she is eternally bound to these core constructs (Adnan, 2010, 2013a).

Nevertheless, as part of the Malaysian school curriculum, students must also acquire English as a second language. This is not an easy task for young *Bumiputera* Malays, perhaps even more so in Islamic schools. This is not to say that all *Bumiputera* Malay students will shun the learning of English or Arabic and other additional languages by virtue of them *being* Malay. In truth, there are *Bumiputera* Malay students who *still* want to learn and use other languages, English for example, compared to just sticking to *Bahasa Melayu* (Ilias & Adnan, 2014, 2015; Rajadurai 2011). *Bumiputera* Malay students, even from rural areas, understand the utility of English as an international language (Karib & Adnan, 2005). Kim’s (2001) research on identity construction involving ESL learners in Malaysia provides a useful insight. She argues that in Commonwealth countries like Malaysia, English will always be viewed as a relic of colonialists and the use of English will remain a thorny issue, even more so for the *Bumiputera* Malay-Muslim majority. Kim (2003) suggests, for the Malays, “Using English could be interpreted as being Westernized or renouncing their Malay cultural identity. It could also be interpreted as being less religious” (pp. 153-4). To exacerbate matters, even if much has been written about the *Bumiputera* Malays and their ‘English Language Dilemma’ (Adnan, 2005), there is a dearth of empirical data on the problems that other languages *might* cause to members of this ethnic group.

As aforementioned, *Bumiputera* Malay students in Islamic schools must also acquire the Arabic language. Arabic is part of the curriculum and it is a language that affords the student the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of all branches of Islamic theology, including the revealed knowledge from God (Allah) in the Holy Koran (Al-Qur’an) (Haji Omar, 2016). But, does this also pose a challenge to the *Bumiputera* Malay identity and the construct of Malayness? In a recent study, it was found that *Bumiputera* Malay students who learned Arabic faced two barriers to become proficient in this language. Whilst the first barrier relates more to their individual lack of drive to learn and practice Arabic, the second is connected to an unsupportive learning environment when it comes to Arabic and insufficient opportunities to practice. Both barriers combine to frustrate Malay students who need to master this language in the few short years that they spend in Islamic schools (Haron, Ahmed, Mamat, Ahmad & Rawash, 2016). In this sense, perhaps some of the difficulties related to learning and using English can also be linked to Arabic (Ismail, Albatsya & Azhar, 2015).

Language use and identity construction in Islamic schools: Participants and data collection

Based on the research literature in the preceding sections, an empirical study was carried for nearly two years to understand the interconnections between language use and identity construction in Islamic schools. Due to a gap in knowledge on both subjects, the study should be able to provide a glimpse into what is *really* happening in Malaysian Islamic schools with reference to language and identity construction. As established above, Islamic schools in the Malaysian context are interesting sites for research not only because these schools cater to

Bumiputera Malay students who are bound to their ethnic, religious and language identities but also because these students have the unique opportunity to learn and use Malay, English and Arabic as they strive to complete their studies on religious matters and secular knowledge. Three research questions guided this longitudinal study:

First, how do *Bumiputera* Malay students make sense of their language learning experiences in Islamic schools? Do they go through the process in a critical manner?

Second, what challenges and opportunities await *Bumiputera* Malay students when they learn English and also Malay and Arabic in Malaysian Islamic schools?

Third, in what ways does the English language construct the identities of *Bumiputera* Malay students in Malaysian Islamic schools vis-à-vis Malay and Arabic?

The participants of this qualitative research project

To answer the three research questions, this study investigated the lived experiences of 30 first year university undergraduates who completed between five to six years of secondary education in national religious schools all over Malaysia. Although the initial plan was to collect primary data from *within* national religious schools, this idea was abandoned due to access problems. Therefore, this project relied on first hand data from fresh Islamic school leavers who just started their first degree year at university. Participants who have completed the whole of their secondary education in Islamic schools were invited through word of mouth with the help of senior representatives of the student body at two university campuses. Research Information Sheets and Data Release Forms were then distributed and duly signed by participants who agree to commit themselves for about four months. As this study took place on campus after lecture hours, official permission was sought from the outset from the respective university's administration. Permission was successfully granted from both campuses, on academic grounds.

The 30 participants who volunteered for this study came from diverse backgrounds. The majority of them were undergraduates of built environment degrees fresh out of Islamic schools. However, there were also participants who completed the STAM certificate but could not afford to continue their tertiary education in Arab countries due to the economic downturn in Malaysia. Others include students from matriculation colleges, polytechnics and private colleges. There were also participants who did art and design degrees and computer science degrees. To better manage fieldwork and to ensure the quality of the data, it was decided that only 10 participants would be engaged per semester with five participants in one focus group. The researcher also strived for an equal mix of gender and managed to gather data from 16 female undergraduates and 14 male ones between late 2015 to early 2017; the age of the participants ranged from between 18 to 21 years. 14 of the participants were fresh Islamic school leavers accepted for an accelerated degree programme. Each focus group was invited to four rounds of discussion staggered throughout the semester; the first discussion session was also the full briefing session regarding this research.

The qualitative data collection and analysis process

Qualitative data were collected by means of two instruments: periodic focus group discussions (Ho, 2006) and written narrative 'reflections' (Barkhuizen, 2011; Pavlenko, 2007) of the Islamic school days of the participants. Fieldwork started with 10 undergraduates in March 2016 followed by another two cohorts of 20 undergraduates until May 2017 at two universities in

northern Malaysia. Four discussion sessions were held with each five-member focus group (coded as 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 3A and 3B). On average, each session lasted about 65-70 minutes. With the permission of participants, all 12 sessions were digitally video recorded. A digital voice recorder was also used as backup. Data were then transcribed and a summary sent to each participant for 'member checking' (Chapelle & Duff, 2003). Each discussion transcript is about 14-18 pages in length. Notwithstanding the first discussion cum briefing session, each focus group discussion addressed one of the three research questions. No specific interview protocols were prepared and each participant was free to comment and share her or his experiences (Ho, 2006). The sessions were conducted by the researcher with the five participants (per group) in both Malay and English language. However, because the participants had to commit to their own degree studies, it was quite difficult to meet up with all group members regularly.

Foreseeing this, each participant was also requested to produce three written narrative 'reflections' (Barkhuizen, 2011) of their Islamic school days, again corresponding to the three research questions. They were asked to submit one written narrative to the researcher each month. The length of these reflections varies from a few sentences to two pages. All the participants managed to complete this task although a few of the narratives were too short to be useful. Together with the transcripts from the 12 focus group discussion sessions, the 90 written reflective narratives constitute the large 'thick' (Geertz, 1973) textual data record that was co-constructed with the participants (Adnan, 2013b). After transcribing and coding the initial data, the data were then thematically analysed in two stages: horizontally (group level) and vertically (individual level). The results of broad thematic analysis of the data (Chapelle & Duff, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) revealed stories of how English, and to a lesser extent Arabic language, shaped the school-based learning experiences of the participants and constructed their language identities. This painstaking process within a span of nearly two years contributed to the quality of qualitative data in this research, in line with Lincoln and Guba's (2000) construct of 'trustworthiness'.

Language use and identity construction in Islamic schools: Data presentation and analysis

Empirical data in this section is organised to deal with the three guiding questions of this research project. Critical analysis of the qualitative data sources led to three broad themes that are linked to the guiding questions. The themes are as follows: First, making sense of and going through the process of language learning; Second, challenges and opportunities related to language learning; Third, English and other languages in the construction of identities. All three themes are related directly to the experiences of participants in and from the research sites, i.e. their Malaysian Islamic secondary schools (*sekolah menengah kebangsaan agama*) located all over the country. These themes are presented and discussed, in turn, below. At this juncture, it is important to highlight that all of the names cited are pseudonyms chosen by the participants for the purpose of writing up and presenting the findings.

Making sense of and going through the process of language learning

According to the participants, the process of language learning in Islamic schools is the same as learning languages in other schools in Malaysia, at least based on the own experiences in their alma maters. The participants did not report going through extreme difficulties other than having to learn different languages on their own merit. Moreover, being *Bumiputera* Malays from the outset, all of the participants reported that they preferred to use their first language, especially for

social conversations. They also said that in the classroom, Malay is widely used even for the learning of Islamic religious subjects when Arabic ideas and concepts are just too difficult to understand. As ‘Nisak’ sees it, “I think for us it’s just normal. We must learn Malay, English also Arabic so we just learn. Just because we’re in the Islamic stream doesn’t mean we have to imagine we are living in Egypt, right? [laughs]” (Focus Group Session [FGS] 2, Group 1B, April 2016). Like Nisak, nearly all the participants reported that their language learning efforts are geared more towards utilitarian purposes or as ‘Mussa’ explains, “to make sure we have superb [language] skills when we want to continue to study at university” (Written Narrative Reflection [WNR] 2, Group 3B, March 2017). The participants said that they focused their efforts to acquire all the skills related to Malay, English and Arabic before they complete their secondary education because “these [languages] are great assets at university” (Mussa, WNR 2, Group 3B, March 2017).

Interestingly, even in a fairly religious learning environment, quite a number of the participants admitted that they preferred learning English compared to Arabic due to their familiarity with the former. Where Malay is used for day-to-day conversations, English is the go-to language of the participants for their ‘future university life’. ‘Reesa’s comment echoes the feelings shared by most of the other participants, “I think English is still important at my old school. Even the Mudir [Principal] of my school used to give speeches to us in English because it’s a language of knowledge. Arabic is important but not like totally important” (FGS 2, Group 3B, March 2017). That being said, ‘Fizan’ cautions that students who are extremely proficient in Arabic were those who wanted to continue their studies in the Middle East or Arab-speaking countries: “Us in this university, we’re the secular ones [laughs]. We focus on English because we know we’ll study non-Islamic degrees. ... We learn Arabic because it’s compulsory if you want to deeply understand the *kitab-kitab* [religious texts]” (FGS 2, Group 3A, March 2017).

As the first paragraph of this subsection highlighted, the participants saw very few differences in learning languages in Islamic schools compared to mainstream Malaysian schools. The participants also chose their mother tongue, Malay, for normal conversations. Remarkably for the participants, most of them preferred learning English compared to Arabic. As we delved deeper into this subject matter, the reasons for preferring English compared to Arabic became much clearer. ‘Arifa’ remarks:

Why we like English? Because Arabic is actually really difficult to master. Just ask anyone. Like for me, I don’t have any basics in Arabic. So, for five years I really struggled. It’s a useful language to learn but it’s just too hard compared to an international language like English. So, for me and my group of friends, we focus on English to score A+ but we always just target to pass in Arabic. (FGS 2, Group 2B, October 2016)

Even the participants who scored excellent grades in Arabic argue that English was a better language to learn. According to ‘Madie’, “I like Arabic that’s why I scored in that subject but my English was A+ because I think I can be more expert in English than Arabic. ... Some of my schoolmates got dismissed because they failed Arabic” (FGS 1, Group 2A, September 2016).

The comments made by other participants resonated with what Madie said. For a number of them, English became their language of focus because of their unfamiliarity with Arabic and

the fact that Malay language was not an easy subject to pass as well. Consequently, English remains significant even in an Islamic religious school environment where Arabic and Malay are thought to dominate the academic sphere. Still, it is important to understand that the comments made by the participants in this study are based on the caveat that they are all products of Islamic schools who have chosen to enter university to do non-Islamic mainstream degree courses. Perhaps, if the same discussions were held with Islamic school leavers who have chosen to continue their higher education in Arab majority countries, a different picture might be painted regarding the process of language learning in Islamic schools. This is surely a worthwhile effort to undertake in future studies.

Challenges and opportunities related to language learning in Islamic schools

The above subsection highlighted the general experience of learning languages in Islamic religious schools. This subsection aims to uncover the challenges and opportunities of learning English and other languages within the research context. Given that the participants believe there were little to differentiate between learning languages in the Islamic stream compared to mainstream academic streams, the third focus group sessions honed in on this issue. Interestingly, what the participants reported were similar to the challenges and difficulties faced by the *Bumiputera* Malays as whole, when it comes to learning and using another language vis-à-vis their mother tongue. As the introduction of this article noted, this Malaysian majority ethnic group is highly protective of their mother tongue, making it difficult for languages other than Malay to co-exist within Malay communities. ‘Rifki’ reminisces:

You want to know the challenge to speak in English or Arabic? For us it’s the same. It’s hard to use other languages with the old-school Malay people [laughs]. ... So, each day we almost totally use Malay. But, in my dorm we also try to practice English and Arabic to face our tests and because for certain lessons our teacher will just use English or Arabic. If we don’t practice, we’ll only fail the subjects. (FGS 3, Group 1A, May 2016)

Rifki further explains that he still faced the same negative attitudes when it comes to using other languages within his campus. For his third language subject at degree level, Rifki chose to study Mandarin Chinese. But, he found it difficult to converse in this language with other *Bumiputera* Malay undergraduates who prefer to stick to Malay whilst conversing.

Reesa agrees that the challenges related to learning English can be traced back to the negative attitudes of some students in her Islamic school. She writes, “I don’t even know why some of the girls make fun when I practice debating in English. I am Captain of the school team but they act as if I’m a show off and they make faces to me” (WNR 3, Group 3B, April 2017). On top of that, some of the more ‘orthodox’ teachers in Islamic schools are also not proficient in English and they do not like students who love to use the language. This was the challenge faced by some of the participants, especially those who attended more ‘old-fashioned’ Islamic schools in less urbane areas of Peninsular Malaysia. ‘Dibah’ remembers her experience in school:

In my school, some of the teachers are old-fashioned, especially the *Ustazahs* [female religious teachers]. If you use English in front of them they will mark you and then make fun of you. Not to say they discriminate but it’s a challenge for me. Luckily my Arabic is good so they don’t badmouth me too much [laughs]. ... I guess it depends on the school.

My friend went to a private Islamic school and her experience was worse than me actually. (FGS 3, Group 3A, April 2017)

Dibah's experience relates back to the general opinion of the participants; they face the same challenges when using English in Islamic schools compared to mainstream schools *not* due to the religious nature of the former but owing to the unconstructive attitudes of some members of *Bumiputera* Malay ethnic group when it comes to language use.

In truth, like any other Malaysian schools, Islamic schools also afford their students the opportunities to acquire and to be proficient in English and other languages. As 'Piqah' puts it, "I guess for all of us, a school is a school. Some teachers are bad, most are okay. Some students are evil, most are nice. It's not a problem with English, the problem is people with negative vibes" (FGS 3, Group 2B, November 2016). Like Piqah, the other participants also believe that there were many opportunities for them to learn and to use English, Malay and even Arabic in Islamic schools. They shared stories about quiz competitions, public speaking contests even *nasyid* [Islamic song] singing tournaments not just within their schools but also at district, state and national levels; some of the participants also represented their schools at state and national levels for English and Arabic based academic contests and tournaments. In the eyes of the research participants, one of the principal reasons why *Bumiputera* Malay-Muslims parents continue to send their daughters and sons to Islamic religious schools is the over-achieving nature of many students in the Islamic stream, themselves included. They argue that the products of Islamic schools are not only proud of their academic prowess but they are also well-versed in the different theological branches of Islam, not forgetting the trilingual abilities of Islamic school students in Malay as their lingua franca followed by the English language and also Arabic as their additional fortes.

English and other languages in the construction of identities in Islamic schools

The focus of this empirical study is to understand the ways in which English and also Malay and Arabic construct the identities of Islamic school students in Malaysia; the final group discussion session concentrates on this. From the outset, the participants linked their language proficiency, especially in English, with their 'future life' as university students doing mainstream degree courses. When it comes to Malay or *Bahasa Melayu*, being in schools with 100% *Bumiputera* Malay teachers and students only serves to strengthen the *Bumiputera* Malay identity of the participants. But, rather than perceiving this as a negative thing, many of participants argue that it is only normal for use Malay with their Malay friends and teachers. As 'Haris' jokingly explains, "I think it's not an issue. Malay students speak Malay language because it's just natural. ... White American or British students also use English in their schools, right? They don't use Japanese or Arabic, am I right? [laughs]" (FGS 4, Group 2B, December 2016). Like Haris, all the participants report using Malay as their main mode of communication and as a way to 'belong' in their Islamic school communities. English and Arabic are viewed as more 'academic' languages more suited for the classroom and to acquire theoretical knowledge.

To be sure, many of the participants imagined that English will enable them to have access to knowledge at tertiary level "and it's absolutely true", says 'Zamil'. He adds, "I'm doing fine arts and our textbooks are in English. It's not easy to understand art history, design concepts and many more. But my friends and I are thankful our English is good and we don't have to

translate” (Zamil, FGS 4, Group 1A, June 2016). English is seen as an academic language that is not just important for successful university study but also for future employment. In the minds of the participants, English proficiency is the symbol of education and career success in all fields, including international business. As ‘Ikram’ writes:

Oh, my English! Everything English! Our teachers ask us to study English until we vomited. But, seriously in Malaysia, English is important because our country is a ‘business country’ (sorry I don’t know how to express it). In business, people from everywhere normally use English. So, English is an important asset for university and for a good job. But, nowadays Mandarin [Chinese] is important also. I already know Arabic and so, now I am studying Mandarin [at this university]. (WNR 4, Group 1B, June 2016)

Dibah, however, emphasises that not everything is easy when it comes to using English in Islamic schools because, “some teachers and students view whoever is good in English as Hollywood artists [laughs]. Maybe if you use English you’ll become Beyonce or Taylor Swift? I was Head Girl [Prefect] but I still faced this typical Malay attitude” (Dibah, FGS 4, Group 3A, May 2017). To counter the “typical Malay attitude” that conflates between English and Western culture is not easy according to the participants. They reported using strategies like only using English with their closest classmates or contributing as much as possible during English lessons so as not to be seen as “Hollywood artists” and the like. The participants all disagreed with the notion that learning and using English makes them more Westernised. All of them thought that this notion is absurd but continues to be espoused by some member of the *Bumiputera* Malay ethnic group. For the participants, English is an important academic language for future career success and it has “so much history behind it” (Dibah, FGS 4, Group 3A, May 2017). At the same time, they cherished the fact the English allows them to creatively express themselves in ways that the Malay or Arabic language cannot.

Arabic is another ‘academic language’ in the eyes of the participants. Even though many of them liked learning Arabic, all of them said that the language is really difficult to master with little contact time between teachers and students in their Islamic schools. Where they viewed English as a language with much history behind it, some of them said that Arabic is more like a ‘historical language’ akin to Greek or Latin. The most illuminating comment with reference to learning Arabic and Islamic schooling came from Nisak: “Islamic school students don’t automatically go to Heaven-*lah* [laughs]. We learn Arabic and Islam to deepen our knowledge of Hari Akhirat [The Hereafter]. We also learn English, Maths, Science, Economy, the normal subjects... this is the truest Muslim identity” (FGS 4, Group 1B, June 2016). Other participants too view their learning of English, Arabic and other subjects as what a Muslim person should be like. They cherish this idealised Muslim identity because Islam as a religion places heavy emphasis on the acquisition and the practice of knowledge to do good deeds and to prevent bad deeds from happening.

Summation and conclusion

Even though each participant in this empirical research went through her or his own unique experience in terms of language use and identity construction in his or her Malaysian Islamic school, the preceding sections highlighted marked points of similarities across the lived experiences of the 30 participants. At the same time, whilst the stories shared by the participants

suggest that they, overall, are quite adept in learning and using English compared to Arabic and even the Malay language, some of them emphasised that this is due to the fact that they are preparing themselves for a more ‘secular’ university education. Within that context, the participants argue that English plays an important role as a conduit for knowledge acquisition, particularly when their textbooks, lectures and even tests (in their present university campuses) are mostly conducted in the English language. On the contrary, the stories collected might possibly be different if the pool of participants was made up of Islamic school students who have set their minds on degree studies in the Middle East where Arabic is given prominence. Indubitably, this is an interesting proposition to examine in future research efforts.

With reference to the first broad theme, *making sense of and going through the process of language learning*, it is still a worthwhile finding to investigate further when students in Islamic schools confess that they felt more at ease with learning English compared to other foreign languages like Arabic. This is perhaps a reflection of the success of the Malaysian government’s effort to raise the overall standard of English in Malaysia since Independence from British colonial rule. It is also interesting to note that the participants believe there are not many differences between learning languages in Islamic schools compared to other school systems that they have experienced. Indeed, for some of them learning languages are just like learning other academic subjects.

As for the second broad theme, *challenges and opportunities related to language learning in Islamic schools*, again the participants believe that the challenges and opportunities they might face in national school are the same in Islamic school when comes to language learning. Some of them highlighted that, in truth, it is the attitudes of Malaysian students particularly Malay-Muslim ones that influence their ability to learn and use English, Malay, Arabic or whatever language is taught to them. Again, this is an issue that must be investigated further in a more critical manner to comprehend the realities of Malay students as language learners within the Malaysian education system.

The third and final broad theme, *English and other languages in the construction of identities in Islamic schools*, reinforces the findings in the two earlier themes but also uncovers the imaginative links that the participants make with reference to their language learning. English, for instance, is a language for their ‘future life’ as ‘university students’ and a language that is a worthwhile investment to land a good and comfortable career in the near future. As for Arabic, it is a language that links back to the Islamic roots of the participants. Learning Arabic is not just for the now but also for the Hereafter. Finally, Malay language is just another ‘normal’ part of life for the participants; Malay is at the core of their language, personal and social identities that can never be replaced or taken over by other languages in their immediate formal learning environments.

About the author

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