

Exploring Islamic Discourse Exposure in Tertiary Level Malaysian ESL Learners

Penggunaan Bahasa Inggeris Sebagai Bahasa Kedua Dalam Memahami Wacana Agama Islam Di Kalangan Pelajar Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia

Aina Al Mardhia Ismail¹

ABSTRAK

Umat Islam di seluruh dunia adalah berbilang budaya, dari pelbagai peringkat umur, dan dari pelbagai latar belakang sosioekonomi. Ini menyoroti pentingnya meneroka lingua franca umat Islam yang berbilang bahasa dalam menyampaikan genre berkaitan Islam dalam pelbagai bentuk wacana. Pada masa ini, kajian yang meneroka bagaimana pelajar multilingual peringkat pengajian tinggi di Malaysia menyampaikan wacana Islam dalam bentuk lisan dan bertulis adalah terhad. Sehubungan dengan ini, aspek pragmatik juga harus diteliti dalam mengkaji penggunaan bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua (ESL) di kalangan mereka yang berkebolehan berbilang bahasa. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tafsiran yang dibuat oleh pelajar ESL peringkat pengajian tinggi di Malaysia dari segi linguistik dan semiotic, mengenai kuliah Islam yang disampaikan dalam bahasa Inggeris. Sebanyak 30 bahan infografik mengenai pemahaman yang dikembangkan oleh pelajar ESL Malaysia peringkat tertier telah dianalisis dari segi bahasa dan gambaran grafik. Bahan-bahan infografik ini menggambarkan pemahaman para pelajar mengenai kuliah agama Islam dalam bahasa Inggeris yang membincangkan mengenai doa, pertaubatan, Akhir Zaman, dan hal-hal lain. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa dalam menggambarkan dan menafsirkan pengisian berkaitan tassawuf Islam, pelajar ESL cenderung menyampaikan pemahaman mereka lebih dari segi bahasa berbanding dari segi gambaran visual. Unsur-unsur kerohanian yang tidak dapat digambarkan dengan pancaindera berkaitan subjek ini, membatasi para pelajar untuk menyampaikan tentang apa yang difahami dan ditafsirkan dari segi visual.

Kata kunci: Pragmatiks Antara Budaya, Bahasa Inggeris Sebagai Bahasa Kedua Peringkat Pengajian Tinggi, Wacana Agama Islam

ABSTRACT

Muslims around the globe are multicultural, from different age range, and from multi socioeconomic backgrounds. This highlights the importance of exploring the lingua franca of the multilingual Muslims in communicating Islamic related genres in multiple forms of discourses. Currently, studies exploring how Malaysian multilingual tertiary level students approach Islamic spoken and written discourses, have been insufficiently limited. In relation to this, appropriateness, aptness, unambiguousness of interpretation, and clarity of comprehensibility of English as a second language are pragmatic aspects to be scrutinised in examining multilingual ESL language users. This study aims to analyse tertiary level Malaysian ESL learners' linguistics and semiotics interpretations of Islamic lectures in

¹ Aina Al Mardhia Ismail, Jabatan Bahasa dan Pembangunan Insan, Pusat Pengajian Teras, Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor. ainaalmdhia@kuis.edu.my

English medium. A total of 30 infographic materials developed by tertiary level Malaysian ESL learners were analysed in terms of their language and graphic representations of what they have aurally perceived. These infographic materials correspond to the learners' understanding of Islamic English lectures discussing on supplication, repentance, the End Time, and matters of the heart. The findings show that in portraying and interpreting the knowledge of realizing ethical and spiritual ideals known as tassawuf in Arabic language, the ESL learners tend to represent their understanding more linguistically rather than visually. This is related to the intangible elements of this subject matter, which limit in signifying the depictions of what is comprehended and interpreted.

Keywords: *Intercultural Pragmatics, English as a Second Language for Advanced Learners, Islamic Discourse*

Introduction

As of year 2020, about one fourth of the world population are Muslims. This implicates that the Muslims around the world are of different ethnic, economic, age, and gender backgrounds sharing the same religious belief. Muslims in the Malaysian multiethnic nation are mostly multilingual. The majority Malay Muslims in Malaysia are native speakers of their own colloquial Malay language variety and use English as the second language (ESL). Some Malay Muslims may have proficiency in Arabic, but most of the Malay Muslims only use Arabic in spiritual Islamic ritual activities in verbal recitation without holistic linguistic ability. English is taught in Malaysian government schools and higher learning institutions. English is also the medium for a number of institutions, organisations and companies in Malaysia.

According to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) global scales, language users at the elementary level should be able to communicate about their daily routines and familiar matters. In relation to this, religious matters should also be something that Muslim language users could communicate about. This is because Islam emphasises that religion is to be integrated in every aspect of life of a practicing believer. Islam generally promotes specific way of life in every aspects of daily routine, relevant for any individual from any background (Hitti, 1971; Morgan, 2010). Hence, from this notion, Malay Muslim ESL learners should also be able to communicate about Islamic related matters in the second language.

Recent applied linguistics studies on multilingual Muslims have mainly focused on their language choice in certain contexts. A study in an Indonesian multilingual Islamic learning institution highlighted that the unconscious language choice of the teachers in their classroom sessions are based on their objectives to engage the students in the learning sessions (Bin Tahir, 2017). A study on multilingual Arabs in Canada related that the Arab participants have affirmative attitudes towards their language repertoires: Arabic, English and French. The Arabs use their native language at home with their family members and for religious activities. Similar to other multilingual contexts, they opt to the official language of their state; English and French in government offices and education institutions (Dweik & Qawar, 2015). A similar study on Arab students, but in India, also showed similar norms of code-switching and code-mixing among bilinguals who share the same native language (Alkhresheh, 2015). According to a case study in an Australian school, Muslim students with limited English proficiency find it challenging in peer studying at school. These minority Muslim students with limited English proficiency find it helpful if any fellow Muslim staff or student with advanced English

proficiency acting as an intermediate person, can assist them in explaining about their religious background and needs at school (Scarino et.al, 2015).

Although studying language choice is important, researchers in applied linguistics ought to explore more on the performance of second language users in multilingual contexts. For this reason, this paper has aimed to explore the Malaysian Muslim ESL learners' language performance in explaining about Islamic related matters in English as their second language. The scope of the study has covered analysing tertiary level Malaysian ESL learners' linguistics and semiotics interpretations of Islamic lectures in English medium. Exploring the ESL learners' intelligibility in their second language performance is more than just looking at their ability in having correct pronunciation, lexis and grammar (Smith & Nelson, 2019). Other elements such as recognising lexical items, understanding the direct meaning of lexical items, and understanding the illocutionary force of lexical items are significant in achieving language proficiency.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach in analysing 30 infographic materials developed by Malaysian Muslim ESL learners who were undertaking their tertiary level studies at a Malaysian higher learning institution. The English language proficiency level of the participants during the study was within the range of CEFR A1 to B2 scale. The ESL learners were assigned to listen to and extract main ideas from Islamic lectures by English speaking figures: Sheikh Yasir Qadhi, Sheikh Nouman Ali, and Sheikh Bilal Asad. The topics of the Islamic lectures are on supplication, repentance, the End Time, and matters of the heart. The task was specifically transferring information from spoken to written form. The English lectures of these speakers were available on YouTube video sharing site during the time of the study. The reason of choosing these Islamic speakers over the others is because of their native-like English elocution and enunciation. It is noted that the speakers code-mix in English and Arabic in their lectures because of the Islamic discourse nature. It is highlighted that it is almost impossible to categorise a speech as an Islamic religious lecture if Arabic language is not used in the presentation at all. This is rationally associated to the fact that the primary foundation of Islam: the Quran and Prophet Muhammad's tradition are both in Arabic (El-Sharif, 2018; Morgan, 2010).

The analysis of the infographic materials focused on the text and visual graphics reflected in the representation of the participants' listening comprehension of the Islamic lectures. The analysis explored how the participants create and communicate linguistic and visual meaning of their understanding of the Islamic lectures in English. In the process of the analysis, semantic; syntactical; and pragmatics elements have been interrelated (Saussure, 1983). In brief, the findings will then look into the pragmatic aspects of appropriateness, aptness, unambiguousness of interpretation, and clarity of comprehensibility of English Islamic lectures.

Findings

The overall analysis showed that the infographic representations of the main ideas extracted from the English Islamic lectures produced by the tertiary level Malaysian Muslim ESL learners are in align to their belief of the Islamic teachings. The infographics produced by the participants reflected more textual information compared to visual information. The topics of the English Islamic lectures that they were exposed to are all distinctively related to the Islamic

belief system. For instance, Islam provides specific guidance in performing the acts of supplication, prayers, and repentance. Muslims also have faith in the unseen and the concept of predestination that the One and only divine God knows everything. This is stated in the Quran in chapter Hadid, verse 22 ‘No misfortune can happen on earth or in your souls But is recorded in A decree before We bring It into existence: That is truly easy for God’ and in the chapter Saba’, verse 26 ‘Say: “ Our Lord will gather us Together and will in the end Decide the matter between us (And you) in truth and justice : And He is the One to decide, The One Who knows all.”’ (Holy Quran, 2001, 34:26 & 57:22)

In the participants’ information transfer from the spoken discourse, the lexical representations of the divine were generally exact in terms of differentiating between God and His creations. This implicates that the ESL learners were able to semantically and pragmatically comprehend the divine messages communicated in the English Islamic lectures. The participants’ infographics clearly showed that the directive speech acts of command are from the unseen divine interlocutor, even though the lectures were delivered by human speakers. In the infographics, this can be seen in the extracts of the Quran verses that Muslims regard as the holy words of the divine. The extracts of Prophet Muhammad’s sayings (*Hadith*) provided in the infographics were also extracts that can be seen as directives from the divine. This phenomenon is not uncommon in the Islamic discourse, because in whatever language an Islamic religious discourse is delivered; the Quran and *Hadith* must be hand-in-hand referred to (Hamdeh, 2019). Such scholarly practice has been a tradition in the Islamic world since the time of Prophet Muhammad. This custom of relying to the primary Islamic sources is justified in the *Hadith* reported by Malik: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “I have left you with two matters which will never lead you astray, as long as you hold to them: the Book of Allah and the *Sunnah* of His Prophet.” (al-Muwatta’: 1661)

In the analysis of the tertiary level Malaysian Muslim ESL learners’ infographics of the main ideas extracted from the English Islamic lectures, syntactical errors were present in terms of subject-verb-agreement rule and the use of tenses. The language errors are purely in terms of linguistics, not the participants’ understanding of their Islamic belief. For example, the error of stating ‘Allah *have*...’ is a common verb-agreement error of Malaysian ESL learners in general. The participants of the study clearly know, understand, and accept the concept of the oneness of God. The use of the plural ‘have’ does not indicate that they semantically and pragmatically associate polytheism in their belief. The presence of ‘misuse of tenses’ was shown in the infographics of the participants in their description of God’s actions. An example of this is the misuse of the simple past auxiliary verb ‘was’ in stating ‘Allah was forgiving...’ to explain that God is always forgiving if one is to repent his or her misdeeds. This interlanguage misuse however does not indicate that the participants assume that God only forgave in the past, because it is clearly understood in the Islamic teachings that Allah is always All-forgiving as mentioned in the Quran in the chapter An-Nisa, verse 106 ‘But seek the forgiveness of Allah; for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.’(Holy Quran, 2001, 4:106)

From the analysis of the participants’ infographics, graphic representations of the main ideas transferred from the Islamic lectures showed no physical visual depictions of God and Prophet Muhammad. It is understood that any Islamic religious discourse would be associated to Allah the Divine and to Prophet Muhammad. However, unlike the western English-speaking culture especially in Christianity which liberally depicts visual images of the prophets and the divine (Cornwell, 2009), the Muslim ESL learners of this study did not replicate the native English pragmatic norms in communicating their understanding of their belief in God and the prophets. It is mutually understood by the Muslims that visually depicted images of Allah and

His prophets are forbidden, in view of the fact that even other pictures that are not related to the divinity and the prophets are at the outset disallowed. In a *Hadith* Aisha (mother of the faithful believers) narrated:

“I bought a cushion with pictures on it. When Allah's Apostle saw it, he kept standing at the door and did not enter the house. I noticed the sign of disgust on his face, so I said, "O Allah's Apostle! I repent to Allah and His Apostle. (Please let me know) what sin I have done." Allah's Apostle said, "What about this cushion?" I replied, "I bought it for you to sit and recline on." Allah's Apostle said, "The painters (i.e. owners) of these pictures will be punished on the Day of Resurrection. It will be said to them, 'Put life in what you have created (i.e. painted).'" "The Prophet added, "The angels do not enter a house where there are pictures.” (Sahih al-Bukhari, 3:34:318)

In representing their understanding of the related English terms related to prayers and repentance which are heavily associated to communication with God, the participants only visually portrayed one party, which is the sender in the communication process. The related visual representations of the term ‘prayer’; ‘repent’; and ‘repentance’ found in the analysis were pictures of a person prostrating, a person raising hands supplicating, and a person in grief crying. These visuals found are all depictions of the source or sender of the communication process. There were no depictions of the intangible Divine Receiver. This implicates that the Muslim ESL learners are pragmatically aware of implying their understanding of the Divinity even in their second language.

Conclusion

The findings of the study implicate that Malaysian Muslim multilingual tertiary level students have shown the ability to integrate their Islamic belief knowledge of the Divinity in English as their second language. The ability to distinguish between the native English pragmatic norms and the ESL learners’ Islamic context can be considered as part of the emergence process of localised varieties of English when both elements of knowledge are integrated. The common language inaccuracies produced by the Malaysian Muslim ESL learners at the upper intermediate level in expressing their understanding of the Islamic teachings point to the requirement to increase the exposure of English Islamic discourse materials in ESL learning sessions. Further research should explore the language choice of Multilingual Muslims in communicating about Islamic related matters in their native tongue, Malay language, ESL or perhaps, in Arabic language. This is because; there are certain circumstances that require Arabic language in Islamic discourses.

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