

MUSLIM IDENTITY AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

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The article is a literature study addressing the conceptualization of Muslim identity specifically in relation to the teaching of English language at schools. It begins with the conceptualization of spirituality and how it differs from religion. Moreover, this article views religious identity as a part of social identity. Therefore, the next discussion is about how religious identity is understood in the context of English language teaching with a specific focus on Muslim identity. In doing so, three interrelated elements of Muslim identity are explored, namely religious beliefs, religious knowledge, and religious practices. Then, a number of challenges in teaching English language for Muslim people are also illustrated. Moreover, the remaining section of this article highlights the specific insight of efforts in maintaining Muslim students' religious identity including how to minimize the negative impacts of English teaching towards the development of religious identity. Finally, some conclusions are drawn.

Keywords: Spirituality, Religious Identity, English Language Teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of spirituality is an important part of Indonesian national identity. As quoted from Yusuf, Tahun, Asyhari & Sudarto (2015), the ultimate position of spirituality and religion is identified in the Indonesian law system as the first premise among the Five Principles in the 1945 Basic Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia through the phrase: "belief in the One and Only God". Additionally, the Law No 20 of 2003 on the National Education System mandates the Indonesian national education system to enhance faith and piety and good morals, in which the phrase of "faith and piety towards God Almighty" becomes the ultimate focus of the educational goal of the education system in Indonesia (Yusuf, Tahun, Asyhari & Sudarto 2015). Apart from the prominent position of spirituality in the Indonesian national identity, there are a number of other elements that build national identity such as spirituality, national culture, local values and ethics, and nationalism (Yulaelawati, 2007; Ena, 2016; Gandana & Parr, 2013; Yusuf, Tahun, Asyhari & Sudarto, 2015). In the development of such identity, the results of relevant literature review reveal the important role of language in constructing identity. Due to its important position, the role of language in identity development becomes one main focus in conducting research on language teaching, including the teaching of English to the speakers of other languages (Kramsh, 1998; Pennycook, 1998; Gray, 2002; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017; Canagarajah, 2013). In the Indonesian context, Indonesian scholars have become increasingly apprehensive on the impacts of English language teaching for the development of Indonesian students' identity, including in relation to their spirituality and religiosity (Alwasilah, 2001; Yulaelawati, 2007; Hamied, 2014; Gunantar, 2017).

2. METHODS

The article is a literature study addressing the conceptualization of Muslim identity specifically in relation to the teaching of English language at schools. This is a qualitative research in which the data is analyzed through narrative analysis. There are ten research articles that become the sources of data in this study. The data collection method is document analysis through discourse analysis as the analytical tools.



3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Religious Identity as a Part of Social Identity

The concept of spirituality is an important part of Indonesian national identity. As quoted from Yusuf, Tahun, Asyhari & Sudarto (2015), the ultimate position of spirituality and religion is identified in the Indonesian law system as the first premise among the Five Principles in the 1945 Basic Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia through the phrase: “belief in the One and Only God”. Additionally, the Law No 20 of 2003 on the National Education System mandates the Indonesian national education system to enhance faith and piety and good morals, in which the phrase of “faith and piety towards God Almighty” becomes the ultimate focus of the educational goal of the education system in Indonesia (Yusuf, Tahun, Asyhari & Sudarto 2015). Apart from the prominent position of spirituality in the Indonesian national identity, there are a number of other elements that build national identity such as spirituality, national culture, local values and ethics, and nationalism (Yulaelawati, 2007; Ena, 2016; Gandana & Parr, 2013; Yusuf, Tahun, Asyhari & Sudarto, 2015). In the development of such identity, the results of relevant literature review reveal the important role of language in constructing identity. Due to its important position, the role of language in identity development becomes one main focus in conducting research on language teaching, including the teaching of English to the speakers of other languages (Kramsh, 1998; Pennycook, 1998; Gray, 2002; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017; Canagarajah, 2013). In the Indonesian context, Indonesian scholars have become increasingly apprehensive on the impacts of English language teaching for the development of Indonesian students’ identity, including in relation to their spirituality and religiosity (Alwasilah, 2001; Yulaelawati, 2007; Hamied, 2014; Gunantar, 2017).

3.2 Challenges in Teaching English Toward the Development of Students’ Muslim Identity

Muslim identity is described as: “a religious person with Islamic characters so that they can acquire the traits based on messages and way of life brought by Prophet Muhammad as well as the ways of life modeled by the Prophet” (Al-Ghazali, 2004 p. 23). This definition implies that Muslim people are expected to follow the practices and prescriptions of Prophet Muhammad. Then, Muhammad’s way of life becomes the ultimate model of the expected identity of Muslim people in the world. Based on the Prophet Muhammad’ ways of life, the concept of Muslim identity is classified into three main interrelated categories: religious belief, religious knowledge, and religious practices (Elyas, 2016). Elyas further explains that the religious belief, or called “*Imaan*” in Arabic, refers to the ideological dimension of Islam religiosity. It is called also called as Islamic cosmology or Islamic theology that comprises six fundamental beliefs: (1) to believe in Allah as the unique transcendent divine being, (2) to believe in His angels, (3) to believe in the Qur’an as the final words of God, (4) to believe in prophet Muhammad as the final messenger of God, (5) to believe in the final judgment day, and (6) to believe in His divine decrees. As addressed, believing the Qur’an as the holy book from God is an element of religious belief for Muslim. Additionally, the Qur’an has a role as the pertinent and most important source of religious knowledge (Elyas, 2016). Moreover, the religious practices refer to the ritualistic dimension of religiosity. In general, the religious practices in Islam are classified into two: *ibadah* (the ritual aspects of behavior) and *muamilat* (dictates related to social attitudes and daily behavior). The *ibadah* comprises the interrelationship between the person and God. It is conducted based on the five pillars of Islam: (1) *shahada* (the declaration of faith), (2) *salah* (daily prayers), (3) *zakat* (tithing), (4) *saum* (fasting) in the month of Ramadhan, and (5) *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the *muamilat* refers to Muslim identity in social life through the promotion of good conduct and good manners in person-to-person interaction. In addition, Islamic teachings also strongly promote high respect to others, specifically to older people and ancestors as well as being obedient and highly respect to parents (Elyas, 2016).

As addressed earlier, however, a number of research results reveal disparity between religious beliefs, religious knowledge, and religious practices as the elements of Muslim identity (At-Tahan, 1999; Al-Ghazali, 2004; Elyas, 2016). As reported by Elyas (2016), many Muslim respondents in his study claim that they believe in God and Prophet Muhammad as the most fundamental beliefs of being a Muslim. However, their religious beliefs do not necessary indicate their religious practices.

Despite the strong beliefs to God and the prophet, research results show that less of them think that doing religious practices are very important things to do. Another example is in relation to the holy Quran as the fundamental religious beliefs, the ultimate source of religious knowledge, and the expected religious practices in Muslim life. Many Muslim people believe that the ability to read the Qur'an is a part of religious identity. Therefore, they recite the Quran regularly as a religious ritual (Elyas (2016). However, it does not necessarily they understand the meaning of what is written in the holy book. As explained by Elyas, the fact that the Quran is written in Arabic language while more Muslims are not Arabic or speak Arabic makes it challenging for them to understand the book. Even for Muslim whose first language is Arabic, most of Muslim people who read the Quran assume that they fully understand the premises within the holy book just by reading it. Elyas justifies that this happens because Muslim people believe that the language of the holy book cannot be simply interpreted literally. Therefore, many Muslims position the ritual of reading the Quran as a religious practice. In understanding the Qur'an as the source of knowledge, it does not merely mean that people learn the holy book by directly read it themselves. Instead, people need to understand the Islamic teachings and law contained as the premises of the quranic divine from other modes such as through Muslim scholars or the books the scholars have written, religious people that socially are believed as knowledgeable about Islam religion or even from electronic resources and social media (Elyas, 2016).

The aforementioned concepts of Muslim identity imply that the identity is closely related to the beliefs, understanding, and practices of Islamic teachings. Another aspect of the conceptualization of Muslim identity is that many Islamic religious rituals are communal activities. This leads to the situation in which the religious ritual practices and attitudes as socio-cultural activities and as a marker of people's identity (Mohamed, 2011; Ashraf, 2015; McClimans, 2019). It is reported that for some Muslims, the active participation within the activities are required to maintain their Muslim identities. The people feel that the absence of such activities might impact to a "social sanction" of being excluded from the society; they will be the "Other" among other Muslims within their communities (McClimans, 2019). Based on his study in Egypt, for example, Mohamed (2011) claims that not all Muslims there do religious practices due to their religious beliefs or religious knowledge. A number of his respondents acknowledge that some of the religious rituals are done because "they are surrounded by others who were observing the same rituals" (p. 79). Thus, the option of not doing the religious might result they will not accepted as the insider of the community.

Despite the complexities in understanding the concepts of Muslim identity, Muslim scholars strongly emphasize the importance of maintaining the religious identity of Muslim people (Al-Ghazali, 2004; Mohamed, 2011; Ashraf, 2015; Elyas, 2016; McClimans, 2019). They also raise a concern of the influence of things outside Islam, such as the impacts of other culture that might damage the teaching of Islam and the religious identity of Muslim people. Studies in regards to the negative effects of non-Muslim culture toward Muslim identity have been recorded in many aspects of life. One of the unwanted impacts that become a big concern among Muslim scholars is the teaching of English language for Muslims, specifically to the young generation of Muslim people. The contribution of English in many aspects of life such as to promote the nation's competitiveness in the globalized world and to transfer knowledge and technology is widely acknowledged by Muslim scholars (Al-Ghazali, 2004; Formen & Nuttal, 2014; Elyas, 2016). Apart from scholars' voices in regards to the positive impacts of the teaching of English language, however, a concern of the negative effects of English teaching is also raised. In his research of the teaching of English at schools in the Saudi Arabia Kingdom, Elyas echoes the argument from Muslim English teachers about their worried feelings about the effects of learning English may have on young Muslim. He claims that there is a big concern that the teaching of English language along with the Western teaching methodologies might be accompanied by Western secular culture, thoughts and ideologies and undermine Islamic values that in the end will damage Islamic young generation. He states:

The current designed English syllabus in the Arab world doesn't reflect the true aspiration of the Muslim Nation. It does not contribute to the right upbringing of a true Muslim generation. The English syllabus that we have in our educational institutions is completely based on the western culture, which is totally different and far away from the Islamic teachings. (Elyas, 2016, p. 77)



The concern of the under-representation of Islamic teachings and Muslim identity in the English language programs is also articulated in Malaysia. Mohd-Asraf (2005) highlights what is called as the “attitudinal resistance” (p. 104) that refers to the anxiety from many Muslim parents in regard to the possible conflict of the Western culture within the English teaching programs toward the development of students’ Muslim identity. Additionally, research results by Formen and Nuttal (2014) reveal the unease from teachers from Islamic schools in Indonesia that the language teaching still give significant privilege to Western culture and marginalize Islamic values. In line with that, Hidayati (2016) articulates issues raised among the stakeholders of Islamic schools in Aceh Indonesia in relation to the anxiety of losing Muslim identity by the influence of Western culture and life style brought by English language.

In spite of the raising concern, however, the option to exclude the teaching of English language for Muslim youths is not considered as a good solution, especially because many Muslim youths have already exposed to English through the global media such as internet, TV, radio, video games, and Hip Hop music (Formen & Nuttal, 2014; Mohd-Asraf, 2005; Ashraf, 2015; Elyas, 2016; Hidayati, 2016; McClimans, 2019). Moreover, Muslim scholars and education practitioners argue that many aspects of both the Islamic and Western worldwide in the context of English teaching for Muslim communities converge each other. However, there are also areas where they are in conflict. In order to minimize the tension, the localization of English envisions into what is called as “Islamic approach” (Elyas, 2016, p. 77) is strongly suggested as an effort to achieve more preferred Islamic values. To do this, the scholars believe that the English culture in the English language teaching should be unpacked with a new emphasis of Islamic religious values in the teaching. By doing so, it is claimed that the learning of English will no longer in conflict with Islamic values (Mohd-Asraf, 2005; Elyas, 2016; Hidayati, 2016).

Despite the robust endorsement from many Muslim scholars, it appears that there is no standardized formula of that such Islamic approach to widely use in teaching English for Islamic communities. A general process called the “Islamisation” is suggested by Mohd-Asraf (2005). He argues that it is necessary to separate the foreign elements from the English language concepts to then replace them with the infusion of Islamic elements. He claims that this is required for: “synthesizing, transforming, and eliminating elements that are foreign to the Islamic worldview such that they fit accordingly into the vision of truth and reality of Islam as well as its ethical and legal frameworks” (Mohd-Asraf, 2005, p. 105). More elaborately, Hidayati (2016) suggests the Islamization process of the language learning by carefully adapting the teaching materials. A various number of ways can be utilized, for example by presenting things related to Islam and Muslim communities such as the mosque, Islamic institution, or Islamic holy celebration. Hidayati describes how Muslim identities are presented for in teaching English for children through the topic of *Pesantren* (specific system of Indonesian Islamic boarding schools). Apart from the visual text, the identity is also represented through a number of common usual themes and language expression used by Muslim people in learning activities. An example provided by Hidayati is the usage of “*Assalamu’alaikum*” (peace be upon you) as one of the most common greetings among Muslim people in starting a conversation or in greeting someone, along with the word “*Waalaikumsalam*” (and unto you peace) as the acceptable response for the greeting. Although it is not a common form of the English usage, Hidayati unravels that the greetings are used in many Islamic schools along with another phrases such: “*Assalamu’alaikum*, Good Morning/Afternoon/Evening. How are you?” or “*Assalamu’alaikum*. Can you tell me how to get to the nearest mosque?” (Hidayati, 2016, p. 79).

In addition to the aforementioned adaptation, it is claimed that the audio-lingual activity can also be adapted to be an alternate form of Islamic way in teaching English. As explained by Hidayati, numerous Islamic English songs are already provided in the markets, most of them are the originally children songs in which parts of the lyrics have been adapted to be “more Islamic” (p. 79). Moreover, popular religious English songs from Muslim singers can also be an alternative in teaching English for Muslim children. Hidayati argues that not only the students can learn English from their songs, but the facts that those singers are living in English speaking countries can be a good motivation for children

to have a positive attitude in learning English without being afraid of losing their Muslim identity (Hidayati, 2016).

4. CONCLUSIONS

This article explores how Muslim identity is understood specifically in the context of English language teaching. Based on the overviews of some related literature, there is diverse range of how Muslim identity conceptualized in different socio-cultural background. Additionally the concept itself has been dynamically changed overtime as well. Consequently, what is meant by Muslim identity in Middle East region might be different from how such identity is understood by Indonesian people. Even the ways people views Muslim identity and what is meant to teach English for Muslim students have also changed from time to time. Apart from that, a number of challenges in English teaching are also reported such as the raising concern in regard to the negative impacts of English culture toward the development of students' religious identity as well as the under-representation of Islamic teaching and values in the learning materials of many English language programs in Muslim communities. As the effort to minimize the undesirable effects of such English teaching programs, a localization of English envisions by emphasizing more Islamic religious values is strongly suggested by Muslim scholars. However, while Muslim identity has been studied and attempts have been made to define and study this construct, however, it appears that majority of the previous studies address the development of the teaching materials while the impacts of those programs toward students' English competencies and their religious identity remains relatively unexplored. Therefore, further research in regards to the effectiveness of such programs toward Muslim students' religious identity is strongly suggested. It is expected that those studies will provide more comprehensive information about Muslim identity in the context of English language learning.

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