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Mastering Foreign Language Skills for Effective Teaching among Excellent Teachers of Islamic Education in Malaysia

Ishak Khairon¹, Kamarul Azmi Jasmi¹, Zaizul Ab Rahman², Nik Shazwani Afifah Nik Sazali³, Mohamad Khairul Latif¹, Muhammad Yusof Hakimi Mohd Kanafiah, Nik Shazwani Afifah Nik Sazali

¹Academy of Islamic Civilization, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Univeristi Teknologi Malaysia, ²Pusat Kajian Usuluddin & Falsafah, Fakulti Pengajian Islam, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, ³Faculty of Science, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Corresponding Author Email: ishak1975@graduate.utm.my

Abstract

Multicompetence helps teachers achieve excellence in the classroom. Teachers keep teaching effective especially when they arouse students' interest by using different teaching methods to acquire skills. This article aims to explore the role of foreign languages as one of the factors that contribute to effective teaching among teachers with excellent Islamic teaching in secondary schools. This case study research uses a qualitative approach to collect data from eight secondary schools in Malaysia. Teachers and students were interviewed and the data was analysed thematically using N'Vivo version 12.0. The result shows that the three languages mastered by teachers are Arabic, English and Urdu. The study also found that mastery of foreign languages improves the quality of teaching, attracts students' attention, increases motivation to learn and makes students enthusiastic about learning during teaching and learning sessions in Islamic Education classes. This study has produced a model that can guide teachers of Islamic education and shed light on the importance of foreign language proficiency and its role in improving the quality of their teaching to students.

Keywords: Teachers of Islamic Education, Foreign Language, Arabic, English, Urdu.

Introduction

School is one of the most important educational institutions because it produces qualified leaders through the use of excellent teachers. Moreover, these excellent teachers acquire extensive knowledge and skills that are essential for the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process, especially in Islamic education (Kamarul et al., 2009). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the discovery of mastery of foreign language skills among the excellent teachers of Islamic education, which might be helpful for the rest of the teachers of Islamic education.

It has been proven that the relationship between the teachings of Islam and language proficiency is close. Islam has been integrated into the community through universal languages, fulfilling the human need for communication based on the history of culture and civilisation. Languages have become a tool to help people survive and communicate and to ensure a harmonious and stable society (Azman & Azhar, 2010).

According to Rahimi and Kamarulzaman (2006), there are four components of language mastery: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among the four components, speaking skill is very important for teachers as it makes the teaching and learning process enjoyable, especially for secondary students. Listening should be emphasised in the classroom as it is the foundation for speaking, reading and writing. It is also a competitive strength that generates knowledge.

Muhamadul (2007) also stated that the teaching process is crucial for both practitioners and thinkers. In essence, the teaching process helps to develop the human mind or social skills by instilling values that help to structure the mind. In addition, methods such as teaching, life experiences and observation lead people to the knowledge of truth. In short, teaching and learning go beyond the physical classroom in many ways.

The chapters of Islamic teaching are divided into four categories: (i) recitation, memorisation and understanding of the Qur'an, (ii) *Aqidah*, (iii) *Ibadah*, (iv) *Akhlaq* and (v) *Sirah* and Islamic civilisations. There are four types of learning outcomes that students achieve in this subject: (i) mastery of the information learnt, (ii) acquisition of skills, (iii) enhancement of student interest, and (iv) promotion of a good attitude as a student. All these learning outcomes require student participation and interaction in the classroom (Kamarul & Halim, 2007). Therefore, the use of different languages in the teaching and learning process attracts students, keeps their attention and encourages their curiosity.

Objective

The aim of this study is to determine the foreign language skills of excellent Islamic teachers and their influence on the teaching and learning of Islamic education in secondary schools.

Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach with multiple cases, known as multisite studies, to ensure the validity of the data. According to Merriam (2001), the study of different cases involves different parts of the field. Therefore, data were collected and analysed from different parts of the field. According to Merriam, this type of data improves the external validity or generalisability of the findings. In addition, data was collected through interviews with the headmaster, friends and students of the excellent Islamic Education Teachers (EIET) as interviewees.

The samples were selected through purposive sampling. Thus, the researchers identified the excellent Islamic teachers from eight schools listed by the Council of Teacher Excellence (2007). According to the Council of Teacher Excellence, there were 32 excellent Islamic teachers to be included in this study. However, only eight teachers were selected in this study, based on two conditions. First, the EIETs have reached Grade 48 or 52 and second,

they teach Grade 4, 5 or 6 students. Teachers who teach Grade 1, 2 and 3 students were not included in this study. These conditions help to control the results based on the teaching experience. The student survey data also supports the teacher survey data. Therefore, the selection of students from Grade 4 onwards was based on their maturity for the survey (Abdullah, 1998). Thirdly, the EIETs also teach Syariah, Usuluddin and Islamic Tasawwur as these subjects are very similar to Islamic education and fourthly, they represent different types of schools (government schools, boarding schools, others) and locations (rural, urban, others). These teachers were also from schools in the north, west or east of Peninsular Malaysia. None of the teachers from the south of Peninsular Malaysia were rated as excellent teachers by the Council. The researcher also selected these eight schools because of the seniority of the EIETs.

Table 1 Indicators of Cohen's Kappa Value

Indicator	Cohen's kappa value indicator
Very high	> 0.90
High	0.70-0.89
Moderate	0.30-0.69
Low	< 0.30

Source: Wiersma (1991)

In this study, the validity and reliability used by researchers in qualitative research involved several steps. According to Bogdan and Miklen (2003), the inventory of semi-structured questions must be reviewed by supervisors and subject matter experts, a pilot study, triangulation of the data, field notes and diaries, review of the developed themes by the experts and calculation of Cohen's Kappa of the experts' agreement with the theme. Triangulation of data in this study includes triangulation of the field survey, triangulation of the interview data supported by field notes and the researcher's diary. After reviewing and compiling the interview transcripts, the researchers began categorising the data based on the themes of the study using N'Vivo version 12.0. After analysing the data and creating patterns, the researchers developed an expert validation form to analyse the responses for Cohen's Kappa score. According to Cohan et al. (2000), this expert agreement is essential as it shows the confirmation of the themes developed by the researchers by other instances than the teachers.

Table 2 List of the Expert Panel and the Agreement on the Structure of the Topics

No	Name	Representative	Position and Qualifications	Expertise	Level of Agreement (Cohen Kappa)
1.	Specialist A	Institute of Education, IIUM	Assistant Professor, Dr.	Islamic Education	0.94
2.	Specialist B	Dep. of Education Foundation and Humanities, FP, UM	Senior Lecture, Head of Dep., Dr.	Teacher Education and Islamic Education	0.92
3.	Specialist C	Faculty of Education, UPM	Ass. Prof., Head of Dep., Dr.	Islamic Education, Moral and Pedagogy	0.92

Table 2 shows the Cohen Kappa value for the experts' agreement on the construction of the themes. Again, the Cohen Kappa value for all experts is above 9.0 (very high), demonstrating the reliability of the data.

Results

Participants were asked the following semi-structured question:

"What foreign language skills does the excellent teacher of Islam master that contribute to the effectiveness of teaching Islamic education?"

Table 3 Pattern of Foreign Language Skills by the Excellent Islamic Education Teachers

	EIET	ST1	ST2	T1	T2	P/PK	DA	OBS
S1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S2	-	-	x	-	-	-	-	-
S3	-	x	-	-	-	-	-	-
S4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S5	-	-	x	x	x	-	-	-
S6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S7	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S8	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Information: 'X' represents data. S.- School, EIET-Excellent Teacher Islamic Education, ST1-Student 1, ST2-Student 2, T1-Teacher 1, T2-Teacher 2, P/PK- Head Master or Assistant Head Master, AD- Document Analysis, and OBS- Observation.

The first skill to emerge from the EIET at S1-S8 is fluency. Table 3 shows that most teachers in this subject have the ability to speak a foreign language, also known as a second language.

According to the data, EIET teachers were proficient in three types of second languages, namely Arabic (S1 and S8), English (S3 and S7) and Urdu (S5). The teachers were proficient enough in these languages to understand and respond to what others were saying in the second language. Example:

(S8) "So is Arabic, at least we can understand and respond when someone speaks. We do not use it regularly, but at least we can reply in Bahasa Melayu and show that we understand. That way we do not feel alienated and left behind."

The words in this passage of conversation indicate that the teacher knows and understands the Arabic of the others. Even if the teacher sometimes cannot answer in Arabic, at least the meaning is understandable and can be answered in the mother tongue, so that the teacher does not feel excluded or left out.

The data from the interview also showed that language skills in English would attract the attention of the students because it makes the teaching and learning process more interesting. The conversation was recorded as;

(S8) "...ustazah likes to speak English in class, although not completely, but we knew she knew the English terms, so, of course, we were excited when she speaks a lot of English."

The words in the above interview passage can be summarised as using English in the classroom for teaching and learning influences students' attention. Although the teacher does not speak exclusively in English, the use of important English terms related to the chapter in the Islamic curriculum to explain the meaning makes the learning process interesting.

The other language recorded during the interview is Urdu. A teacher from S5 is fluent in Urdu, having previously learnt it in India.

(S5) "... and ustaz can speak Hindustan... We like it so much when he speaks Hindustan. Sometimes it's funny... He once mentioned that he studied in India... There were so many things he told during class time."

The above statement shows that the mastery of Urdu language by the teacher who has studied in India has become an additional skill that improves the quality of his teaching and entertains the students. This keeps the teacher's teaching interesting and not boring. It also arouses the attention and interest of the students.

Discussion

The use of a language other than the mother tongue in Islamic education can usually improve and train students' listening skills. Meanwhile, these listening skills are important in all subjects, so students can use these skills in other subjects as well. Without proper listening training, the information taught in class is difficult to understand and is not remembered by the students. On the other hand, when students receive adequate listening training, the information conveyed with the important points can be better retained in the students' memory (Rahimi & Kamarulzaman, 2008). This fact is also confirmed by Abdul (1993) who stated that the quality of listening should be improved by practising listening in order to increase the percentage of absorption of the information presented.

The language that is closely associated with Islamic education is Arabic. Therefore, the use of Arabic in this subject helps the teacher to explain the chapters of the curriculum in more

detail. According to Azman and Azhar (2010), Arabic language needs to be reviewed and mastered by individuals who want to study Islamic education or any other related subject. Islam is synonymous with Arabic and the understanding of Islam will be limited if one does not master the Arabic language. The Al-Quran, Hadiths, religious scriptures and authority in all fields of Islam are written in Arabic. It can be concluded that mastery of the Arabic language is necessary to understand and embody Islam. The choice of Arabic as the medium of revelation to mankind is described in Al-Syu'ara' (26: 195), meaning "...with a clear Arabic", then the guarantee of Allah, the Exalted, that this revelation will not be changed at any time in the world, from Al-Hijr (15: 9), meaning: "It is We Who have sent down the Qur'an, and We shall certainly preserve it."

Moreover, the use of different languages in teaching the Islamic subject shows one of the characteristics of effective teachers, namely (i) knowledge, skills and expertise, (ii) diversity of teaching methods, and (iii) fostering students' motivation, enthusiasm and curiosity. According to Mohamad (2007), the first characteristic is explained by the fact that an effective teacher must have in-depth competencies in the field or subject. Teachers must have knowledge, skills and extensive experience in their subject. They should constantly improve their knowledge and skills in the subject they teach in order to be up-to-date, attractive, energetic and inspiring. If they are able to correctly answer the questions of the students, who are sometimes strangers to the subject, with facts and concrete evidence, this would create enthusiasm and confidence and encourage the students to continue their studies by pursuing the discipline of epistemology.

The use of different languages in the classroom shows that teachers use a variety of teaching methods. Classes will run smoothly, attractively and effectively if teachers use a variety of methods appropriate to the subject matter and skills. Teachers should use a variety of methods to teach the subject matter in the form of theory and practical lessons. In addition, the teachers' behavioural style, such as tone of voice, storytelling, humour in the face and also the use of different languages, will make the students follow the teaching and learning effectively. The third characteristic is explained by the fact that the use of foreign languages in the classroom can arouse students' interest. This is because the involvement of active students leads to greater interest and also continuous learning (Mohamad, 2007).

Implication

Based on the findings, the researcher has developed a new model, the model of language as one of the factors that influence excellent teachers of Islamic education. The model is described as shown in Figure 1.

Based on this model, there are three types of languages used by EIETs as shown in the study. Teachers who are proficient in a foreign language have many advantages. Teachers who know Arabic have the opportunity to study Islam itself in depth. As we all know, there are many reference books on Islam published in Arabic and written by members of the scholarly community. Understanding and knowledge of Islam itself can also be gained from the Al-Quran and the Hadith, the main reference source for Islam. In addition, teachers who are proficient in English can use the internet or newspapers to find out about current issues relevant to Islam that are occurring at home or abroad. When these issues are linked to the learning in the Islamic education chapters, the issues certainly stimulate students' thinking

and make learning more interesting. This is also true for teachers who are proficient in Urdu. All aspects for the type of foreign language teacher serve teaching and learning.

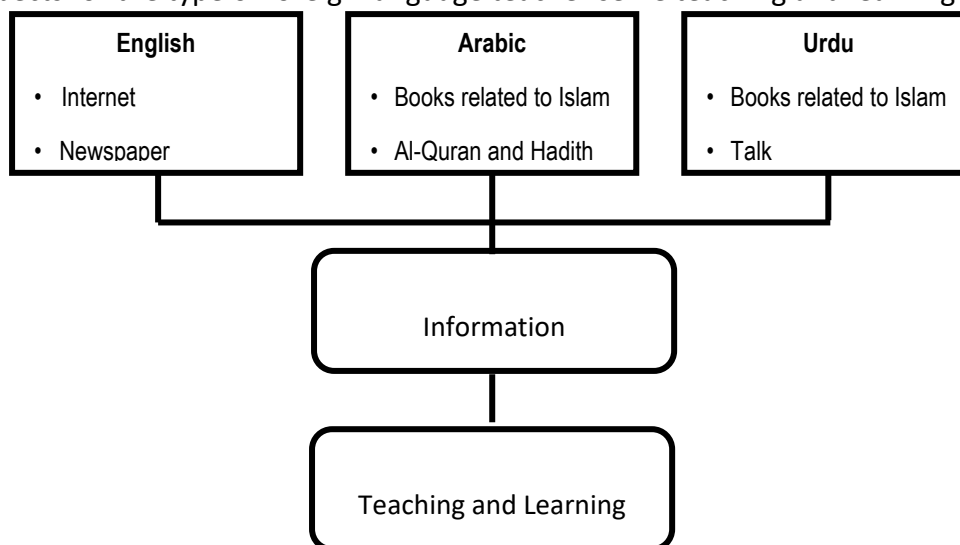


Figure 1: Model of the Relationship Between Foreign Language Skills and Teaching and Learning Process

Therefore, this model can be used by teachers of Islamic education for the teaching and learning process so that the objectives contained in the subject can be achieved. It is hoped that this model can be used by teachers of Islamic education as a guide to make teaching and learning in their class more interesting and to encourage students' interest in the subject. In addition, this model can hopefully encourage teachers themselves to continuously improve their skills for the subject they teach and prove the benefits of foreign language skills for Islamic teacher excellence. The proper use of foreign languages helps students learn because it can provide them with the best possible learning environment. The content of Islamic education is therefore suitable for use in all languages. The concept of teaching Islam is compatible with the image and appearance of a true Muslim in a way of life.

Conclusion

This study has shown the importance of teachers' mastery of multilingualism for Islamic education as it has a strong impact on students' learning. The findings also show that the excellent Islamic teachers are proficient in three foreign languages, namely Arabic, English and Urdu. These languages play an important role, for example, in translating books and providing additional information to students in the form of newspapers, articles and internet resources. The students showed interest in the lessons, which shows that language can also be an added value for teachers, in addition to teaching aids, in order to arouse students' interest in the lessons.

The result of this study shows that teachers who have limited knowledge and experience in using teaching aids, but are proficient in foreign languages, consider their foreign language skills as valuable. It is also a practical and immediately applicable skill that makes the teacher not only knowledgeable but also interesting and varied.

Therefore, other teachers who know foreign languages should become confident and use these languages as an attractive approach to attract students' attention in class. The result of

the study produces a model, which can be used by all teachers and trainee teachers of Islamic education in planning and implementing the teaching and learning of their classes. Therefore, the school administration and the Ministry of Education should organise courses to introduce teachers of Islamic education to foreign languages of their choice and encourage these teachers to use the language in the classroom as well.

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