# English Language Learning, Environment, and the Formation of Islamic Self-identity among Students in Selected Religious Secondary Schools

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The relationship between Islamic values and foreign languages in the school environment offers a relatively good example of the challenging aspects of Islamic identity formation amongst the students. Therefore, this study aims to explore the influence of English language learning and environment in the process of Islamic self-identity formation. Focus group interviews were conducted with 90 students and 15 teachers from selected religious secondary schools in Malaysia. The study found that environment is influential in the process of Islamic self-identity formation among the students, and English language learning does not have a negative influence on the process. Instead, certain virtues such as respect, self-confidence, cooperation, teamwork, diligence, and decency are inculcated in the students' self-identity during the English language learning process. Teachers and educational administrators should put more effort toward the best educational provisions for the students' religious identities through exposure to the values of self-identity beyond the scope of textbooks.

**Key words:** *Islamic identity, language learning, Malaysia, religious schools, self-identity theory.*

## Introduction

Identity is an important non-cognitive aspect and one of the fundamental concepts of human beings that effects student behaviour and attitude toward education (Alghorani, 2003; Flores-Crespo, 2007; Hejazi, Lavasani, Amani, & Was, 2012). It refers to the manner in which individuals define themselves and their relationships with others (Schwedler, 2001). This is because identity can be formed through interactions with other people. Specifically, Islamic identity is critical in the self-perception of Muslims and could influence their attitudes (Alghorani, 2003). The concept of identity formation is considered as the process through which individual and group identities are constructed (Rissanen, 2014).

The foundation of identity in contemporary discourse varies according to various aspects such as language, education, religion, nationality, gender, lifestyle, and socio-economic position. This development encompasses a range of dimensions particularly in the educational sector. Schools are places with diverse identities where the lifestyle and interaction amongst students are considered influential (Ismail, 2004). Hassen (2013) argues that the complex relationship between religion and education has a more significant influence on the identity formation of Muslim youths than their religion alone. The relationship between Islamic values and foreign languages in the school environment offers a relatively good example of the challenging aspects of Islamic identity formation. In fact, religious identity formation is accorded much attention in contemporary discourse (Borisov, Akaeva, & Kazieva, 2016).

Contemporary Muslim youth identity needs to be understood in relation to Islamic values and educational needs. This is because students in particular are exposed to different norms, especially through secular public education (Janson, 2012). Therefore, this study aims to explore the influence of English language learning and environment in the process of Islamic self-identity formation among religious secondary school students, particularly in the state of Terengganu, Malaysia. The study focuses on the perceptions of students and teachers in regard to English language learning, school environment, and the values of Islamic self-identity. Preserving the identity of the next generation of Muslims is a fundamental question for rapidly growing Islamic communities (Janson, 2012).

## Islamic Identity Formation

Islamic identity formation is dependent on the individual's level of religious commitment. In this situation, interaction with other people also influences the process of identity formation. This is because people develop their identity through their relationships with the immediate members of the community, such as parents, colleagues, peer groups, and school mates. As such, the environment is an important factor in determining identity formation. The concept of identity formation is complex (Rissanen, 2014) and, therefore, understanding the religious

structure of the population and its relationship with the immediate social environment is helpful in revealing religious identity (Borisov et al., 2016). Identity formation involves numerous psychological and social domains, including education, religious beliefs, political beliefs, occupational choices, and interpersonal relationships. Overall, identity is one of the most fundamental concepts of human beings (Alghorani, 2003).

Previous studies have investigated the issue of identity formation in various facets and dimensions. For example, Rissanen (2014) conducted a case study to examine different ways of supporting the development of Muslim students' religious identities in the classroom. According to the study, the teachers demonstrated their belief in collective Muslim identity, and hence promoted unity in the heterogeneous class. A study conducted by Milligan (2003) also found that most teachers the Philippines believe Islam is a complete way of life, which signifies the influence of Islamic identity on education. The assertions of Islamic identity among the teachers offers a variety of different but interrelated levels of meaning in relation to commitments for Islamic identity formation in the study area. Dewi (2011) examined the identity formation among female Muslim youth in Indonesia through literature. The author argued that literature studies could be useful in revealing the identity formation among young Indonesian female Muslims considering the books they read and write.

Some people have started to produce literature specifically designed for an English- speaking Muslim audience (Janson (2012).

Miedema (2014) investigated the impact of schools in terms of the procedure of educational relations amongst the experts on the identity formation of students. Hassen (2013) focused on the conceptualization of the dialectical relationship between religious education and identity formation in Islamic schools, particularly in Australia. The study specifically focused on the complex relationship between religion, Islamic identity formation, and educational politics. It explores how schooling relates to the development of Islamic identity formation. Selçuk (2013) argued that, while researchers have made a significant contribution toward the issue of Islamic identity formation in the educational sector, they were unable to transform the teaching and learning environments. According to the author, there is need for a language by which one can enter the public sphere religiously.

Schmidt (2004) explored the aspects of transnational identity formation among young Muslims in three Western countries: Denmark, Sweden and the United States. The findings indicated that there are challenges facing transnational Muslim identity formation in the West, particularly in relation to the environments and regulations of the host countries. Omar (2012) also noted that Islamic identity formation faces challenges especially in multicultural, predominantly secular societies. Franz (2007) investigated the relationship between the politics of discrimination, relative deprivation, and Identity Formation among Europe's Muslim youth. The author argued that many Muslims entrench themselves in segregated, secluded, and

separate divisions and in groups disenfranchised from their surrounding societies due to the socioeconomic and political situations in their states of settlement, rather than for any religious reasons.

Omar (2012) explored the aspects of Islamic identities in the Canadian multicultural context. According to the study, Muslim individuals and institutions experience various degrees of difficulty in preserving their traditions and practicing certain aspects of their religion. Borisov et al. (2016) studied the forms of religious identity in relation to the self-consciousness of contemporary Dagestan youth. According to study, the actualization process of Islamic identity is particularly active in Dagestan. Nonetheless, despite the increase in the number of Islamic secondary schools, Islamic literature and mosques, the level of religious consciousness among the Muslim youth remains significantly low. In a similar situation, Abu-Ras, Senzai, and Laird, (2013) used interviews to study how the traumatic events of September 11, 2001 attacks changed the collective identity among American Muslim physicians. The findings showed that the preconception faced by many Muslims has affected their sense of identity.

Bectovic (2011) investigated the process of identity formation among Muslim migrants in Europe, taking into consideration their ideological background and their motivations to organize themselves as Muslim. The author argued that understanding the ideological background of Muslims is an important requirement for understanding the development of Muslim identity. Other aspects such as morality, spirituality, and philosophy play a crucial role in Muslim identity formation. In a similar context, Brown (2006) focused on the Islamic identity among British Muslim and the positions it offers Muslim women in Britain. The study considered the interplay between religion, gender and ethnicity. Precisely, two sets of rights were studied: the right to employment and education and the right to personal security and family. It was found that although Muslim women have not constituted a homogenous group, the formation of an articulated "Islamic" identity in the public and private domains by some Muslim women provides them with the ability to discuss and secure their rights in different and constructive methods.

Chaudhury and Miller (2008) explored the process of religious identity formation among Bangladeshi-American Muslim adolescents. According to the study, religious identity formation among the respondents occurs within the context of a cultural and generational gap, exposure to alternative belief systems, and a desire to understand why certain practices are followed. In addition, the study found that religious identity formation is a continuous process that allows the individuals to determine and develop their distinctive religious path. A study conducted by Alghorani (2003) investigated the interrelations between Islamic identity, acculturation, and adjustment for adolescent Muslim students in Islamic schools in Chicago suburb communities. The findings demonstrated that Islamic identity correlated positively with Islamic knowledge, Islamic practices, and personal adjustment.

In sum, identity formation has been explored in terms of educational (Milligan, 2003; Hassen, 2013; Rissanen; 2014; Miedema, 2014), psychological (Abu-Ras et al., 2013; Borisov et al., 2016), and socio-cultural (Schmidt, 2004; Franz, 2007; Omar, 2012) perspectives. None of the previous study investigated the formation of Islamic Self-identity through language learning particularly in the Malaysian educational sector. Aljunied (2006) reviewed a genealogy of writings dealing with issues of Malay-Muslim identity formation in Singapore. According to the study, most of the works discussed employed ethnographical and sociological approaches. These approaches were used to investigate recurrent issues constituting important components of Malay identity, including language, Islam, culture, and environment.

**Theoretical Approach**

This study is guided by the social identity theory developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner during the 1970s. The theory suggests that the behaviour of an individual could be changed through the modification of their self-identity, or some aspects of their self-concept, which is derived from the knowledge of, and emotional attachment to a particular group. According to the theory, interpersonal behaviour is determined mainly by individual characteristics and interpersonal interactions (*Tajfel & Turner, 1979)*. A basic assumption in this theory is that an individual is inherently motivated to achieve positive distinctiveness, and that individuals struggle to preserve positive identity. Identity itself refers to continuity in the sense of self within an individual (Horowitz, 2012). The concept of individual identity is a topic of concern amongst scholars in various fields. Although social identity theory focuses more on the people's behaviour, it encompasses some fundamental socio-cognitive processes associated with identity-related behaviour (McCall & Simmons, 1978).

Social identity theory properly articulates the fundamental socio-cognitive processes of categorization and self-enhancement with "subjective belief structures." Categorization improves intergroup restrictions by creating group-distinctive stereotypical and normative perceptions and actions. It also allocates people, including oneself, to the contextually relevant category. It functions on both social and non-social motivations to highlight and emphasize the areas of experience which are personally important in a specific context. On the other hand, self-enhancement guides the social categorization process so that stereotypes and in-group norms mainly favour the in-group. It is presumed that individuals have a fundamental need to view themselves in a positive light in relation to relevant others (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995).

**Method**

The study employed a qualitative approach in which focus group interviews were conducted with 90 students and 15 teachers in selected religious secondary schools in the State of

Terengganu, Malaysia. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling technique and divided across different sessions to make the sample size manageable during the interview. It has been generally recommended that six to ten (MacIntosh, 1993) or even fifteen respondents (Goss & Leinbach, 1996) could be included in the focus group interview per session. The respondents were selected from five religious institutions consisting of one urban school (Sultan Zainal Abidin Scondary School), one sub-urban school (Imtiaz Secondary School), one rural school (Setiu Secondary School), and two sub-rural schools (Durian Guling Secondary School & Marang Secondary School). A semi-structured interview was conducted in separate sessions with each session consisting of either male or female students exclusively based on the common practice in Islamic religious secondary schools. All collected data was transcribed and analysed using inductive thematic analysis.

The predetermined questions for the students and the teachers were designed differently. In this regard, Sewell (2008) asserted that semi-structured interview is useful in reducing bias when comparing the responses of different respondents. The interview flow was based on the predetermined questions, but the respondents were allowed to expand their responses. Also, specific questions were asked to clarify any interesting piece of information arising during the interviews. The questions asked during the interview allowed the participants to provide answers in their own words to obtain more detailed descriptions and explanations. Semi-structured interviews provide actual words of people and offer different perspectives on the study topic. They provide a complex picture of the situation and generate more information from the participants which may not be anticipated by the researcher (Creswell, 2012).

The interview responses were analysed using the comparatively generalized four stages of interview data analysis proposed by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007): Generating natural units of meaning, classifying, categorizing and ordering these units, structuring narratives to describe the interview contents, and interpreting the interview. According to Cohen et al. (2007), qualitative data analysis is almost inevitably interpretive, since it is less a completely accurate representation as in the numerical tradition. The data were inductively coded by reading through the text, identifying, classifying and interpreting the themes based on the information given by the participants. Each of the explanations, comments, opinions and arguments made by the participants was critically interpreted and evaluated. Only the relevant information provided was coded and analysed. The interview responses were interpreted in a way that does not compromise the original meaning expressed by the participants.

**Findings**

This study was set to explore the perceptions of students and teachers with regard to the influence of English language learning and environment in the process of Islamic self-identity formation among students. The interviews consist of 90 students and 15 English language

teachers in five religious secondary schools in Terengganu, Malaysia. This selection was based upon the respondents' willingness to participate in the research. The data generated from the interview was analysed based on the emerging themes under the predetermined interview items. The emerging themes from the students' responses are represented in the following table.

**Table 1:** Students' perceptions of their Islamic self-identity

| Questions | Themes | Exemplary quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Based on your experience, what influences your Islamic self-identity in the learning process? | School environment | …. teachers play a big role in shaping our self-identity. ….if we were not exposed to the Quran at this stage, it is not possible for a good self-identity to be formed. |
| | | …when we get along with good people, we start to change for the better… |
| | | Schools play an important role and make a huge impact in shaping our identity and image…. |
| | | [At school] We learn more manners. We get more reminders and advice. |
| | Parents at home | In early age, while at home, parents gave us early exposure…. |
| | Societal norms | …. the norms of the society play an essential role. For example, the norms of Malay people; wearing *Baju Melayu* and *Songkok*. |
| | Community | The surroundings also play their part…. |
| | Individual's principles and beliefs | …. one's self-identity is not going to change if ones have strong principles and belief. |
| What is your opinion on this statement? Students who master English language have the personality similar to the western. | Not the main factor | ….it depends on the individual's faith and belief eventually It depends on the individual and other factors…. |
| | Not influential | Even though a student learns and master English Language, he may have a strong Islamic value in himself… ,,,, English is merely a subject. |

|  | Might be through imitation | English language female teachers do not wear Hijab.. |
|  | Might be due to lack of religious education | ….perhaps it is due to lack of religious exposure and education but it is surely not mainly because of the language learned or spoken. |
|  | Feeling proud | One will feel proud and great when they are fluent in English… |

The first question was purposefully broad in nature, which allows the researcher to obtain a general sense of the interviewee's perception of their Islamic self-identity in the learning process. The students were asked to express their views regarding what influences your Islamic self-identity in the language learning process. As represented in Table 1, the students feel that their Islamic self-identity is influenced by the school environment, parents at home, societal norms, community, and the individual principles and beliefs. In addition, the students believe that performing the five "daily prayers", respecting others, helping others, being polite, and wearing proper Islamic attire constitute part of Islamic identity. The students stated that, in the school environment, they learned how to wear proper Islamic attire, have the courage to impede wrongdoing, talk politely, and have exemplary behaviour. This demonstrates the complexity of Islamic identity formation. In addition, adolescence is an important stage in the students' Islamic self-identity formation, which occurs in various dimensions, scopes, and aspects including education (Alghorani, 2003; Rissanen (2014).

Table 1 also shows that English language learning does not negatively influence the process of Islamic self-identity formation among the respondents. They believe that the quality of self-identity "rests on the individual's belief, even if there are changes or foreign elements in the surroundings." English language learners may develop personalities similar to that of the west due to other factors such as the environment and mode of dress, not necessarily the language used or learned. Various factors such as the surrounding and societal norms could influence the individual's Islamic self-identity (Alghorani, 2003). According to the students' responses, English is "merely a language," and negative influence on Islamic self-identity occurs due to other factors, "not mainly because of the language learned or spoken." The students reasoned that there are some students of English who do not take any of the Islamic subjects such as *Usuluddin* (fundamentals of Islam), Hadith and Quran, but they are still well-mannered and have strong Islamic self-identity. However, the students believe that those who master the English language feel proud of themselves. The following table shows the teachers' perceptions with regard to the influence of English language learning and environment in the process of Islamic self-identity formation among the students.

**Table 2:** Teachers perceptions of the students' Islamic self-identity

| Questions | Themes | Exemplary quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Based on your experience as a language teacher, do you think language the main factor that shaped students' identity? | School environment | ….is largely shaped by the exposure of Quranic context and environment. |
| | | [the] students' personality is shaped by the environment, |
| | | There are parents and families who are shocked by the changes in their children's image and personality… |
| | | .. can lead congregational prayers... |
| | Teachers' role | [teachers] actively interweaving advices and exposing moral values…. |
| | Culture | ….. as a Malay, we speak in a tactfully worded dialect and this reflected in our manners…. |
| | | …Chinese students…. they talk fast thus often take drastic actions. |
| | Language | ….the more languages mastered by a student, the higher the student's value in society. |
| Based on your experience as a teacher, what influences does English language have on the students' self-identity? | Nonnegative influence | [the] students speak English better than Arabic but still carry Islamic images and morals… |
| | | Even when the students master the English language, their self-identity….will not be lessened….. |
| | Positive value | … He will feel more confident when he is able to speak in a foreign language... |
| | | …students who master English language are more confident… |
| | | .. students who are proficient in English are more confident… |
| | | If the student can master a foreign language, it should boost his confidence. |

| | Less influential | I think it's more about environmental factors… |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | | …English doesn't necessarily make students become immoral [or] have the personality of English… |
| | | They still have their self-identity… |
| | Positive influence | Students who speak English well will be impacted positively rather than negatively. |
| In your opinion, is there any element of self-identity in English language teaching in school? | Respect | .. respecting school administrations... … depends on the individual's perspective.. |
| | Self confidence | … this is more about their self-confidence. |
| | | ....there are no elements in the teaching session that may damage the students' self-identity. |
| | | …their self-confidence enhanced.. |
| | Diligence | It builds their self-confidence and a more positive attitude… |
| | | These students also have an enthusiastic, diligent attitude. |
| | Decency | Through the stories and literature components, we highlighted the good values to cultivate good self-identity values… |
| | Not in all English lessons | …. there is no self-identity values instilled in grammar lessons. |

The teachers were asked to express their views regarding the factors influencing the students' Islamic self-identity in the language learning process. As represented in Table 2, the teachers feel that their students' Islamic self-identity is influenced by the school environment, teachers, culture, and language. In addition, three different themes emerged regarding the influence of English language learning in the process of Islamic self-identity formation. According to the interview data, English language learning could either be more positively influential or less positively influential, but it does not have a negative influence in the process of Islamic self-identity formation among the students. This demonstrates the complexity of Islamic identity formation. In addition, adolescence is an important stage in the students' Islamic self-identity

formation, which occurs in various dimensions, scopes, and aspects including education (Alghorani, 2003; Rissanen (2014). The interview data also suggests that certain positive elements of self-identity, such as respect, self-confidence, cooperation, teamwork, diligence, and decency, are found in the teaching and learning process. Nevertheless, self-identity values are not stimulated by certain aspects of the English syllabus and teaching approaches, such as grammar lessons.

**Discussion**

The findings reported in this study showed that the school environment is influential in the process of Islamic identity formation among the students, and English language learning does not have a negative influence in the process. This might be due to the restrictive nature of the environment and their unique cultural background (Ismail, 2015), because the people of Terengganu, by nature, cherish their culture and religion (Abdullah & Nasir, 2017). Statements such as "we need to preserve our culture," and "learning English does not make us interested in English culture" indicate the students' strong commitment to their culture. Teachers play an important role in cultivating students' self-identity. It was found that there were some good values instilled in the teaching of the English language, such as respect, self-confidence, cooperation, teamwork, diligence, and decency. Therefore, if English teachers would demonstrate good examples of Islamic teaching during the learning process, their activities could be more influential in building the students' Islamic self-identity through their Islamic appearance and delivery of Islamic values during the learning.

In addition, statements such as "parents and families who are shocked by the changes in their children's image and personality" and "actively interweaving advices and exposing moral values" indicate the teachers' strong confidence in the influence of the school environment in the process of Islamic self-identity formation among their students. The teachers showed that their students have strong Islamic culture, which is positively enhanced by the school environment. This is consistent with the findings from an interview conducted by Brown (2006) in the same direction. Teachers, administrators, and religious leaders as well as societal organizations should join forces for the best educational arrangements to let the students' religious identity formation flourish. In their relations, social actors react to a myriad of perceptions that they have formed through their previous interactions as well as their lack of interaction. Identity is the sum of these perceptions constructed by individuals in relation to their environment.

Identity shapes peoples' standard of judgment by providing them with a horizon within which value discriminations are possible (Kosebalaban, 2005). Muslims are becoming increasingly conscious of their identity as Muslims and their reflection on such identity (Brown, 2006). The collective articulation of community and identity realized in the *Umma* (Muslim community), traditions are changing. Culture is being redefined to include the customs and habits of Muslims

from all over the world. In the recently formed policy of SUKMA (Sukan Malaysia/Malaysian Sports) organization, there has been an emphasis on the issue of *Aurat* (nakedness) and this practice provides an example of well cultivated self-identity values. This could be done through widening the students' thinking horizon by exposing them to current issues and instilling self-identity values, and not just purely sticking to what is in the textbooks. In addition, Terengganu State Education Department has launched PKBM (Pasukan Kadet Bersatu Malaysia/Malaysian United Cadet Corps) to encourage the students toward language mastery and identity formation through games and other activities with the community.

In sum, the English language learning process does not negatively influence the students' Islamic self-identity formation, perhaps due to the restrictive nature of the environment. Teachers, including English language teachers, could play a significant role in cultivating students' Islamic self-identity by instilling good values in the teaching and learning process. Social identity theory presumes that people are motivated to form a positive identity, and they strive to preserve their identity (*Tajfel & Turner, 1979)*. A study emphasized the importance of local literature in English language learning in Malaysian secondary schools (Pillai, Menon & Vengadasamy, 2016). The use of local content as familiar reading schemata could facilitate religious identity formation, English proficiency, and cultural awareness among the students (Yahya, Ibrahim, Ramli, Yusof, & Othman, 2017). In fact, adolescence is a very important period of identity formation, during which the youths are provided with chances to discover their own identities in association with their own interests, objectives, and abilities, as well as in negotiation with the values of their social environments (Good & Adams, 2008).

**Conclusion**

This study investigated the influence of English language learning and environment in the process of Islamic self-identity formation among religious secondary school students in Terengganu, Malaysia. It is evident in this study that environment is influential in the process of Islamic self-identity formation among the students, and English language learning does not have a negative influence in the process. Instead, certain virtues, such as respect, self-confidence, cooperation, teamwork, diligence, and decency are inculcated in the students' self-identity during the English language learning process. Hence, the English teachers' personality would determine the students' self-identity formation. According to social identity theory, an individual is inherently motivated to achieve positive distinctiveness. The students have a strong Islamic culture which is positively enhanced by the school environment. Nevertheless, the study found that students who master the English language feel proud of being able to speak the language. This study also provided evidence of the students' ability to construct their Islamic self-identity despite the challenges of foreign language learning in relation to cultural influences.

In addition, the surrounding and societal norms play a significant role in the students' Islamic self-identity, which demonstrates the complexity of Islamic identity formation. There is a need for the collective effort of teachers, educational administrators, and religious leaders as well as societal organizations to provide the best educational provisions for the students' religious identity formation. This process could be facilitated by broadening the students' intellectual ability through greater exposure to the values of self-identity beyond the scope of textbooks. Relevant authorities may consider incorporating local content in the English literature syllabus and prioritizing Muslim English writers. In addition, teachers need to discover a more creative approach and structure the syllabus based on Malaysian environments and Malay culture.

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