Students’ Perspective on Incorporating Arabic Words in the Teaching of English to Muslim Learners

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Abstract

The presence of words and concepts in the English language that do not correspond with the meaning held by Muslims has been highlighted by a number of Muslim scholars. It is argued that there are English words that fail to reflect the meanings that Muslims intend to convey due to the fact that many Arabic words are not accurately translatable into English. Furthermore, Muslims believe that many of the meanings of Arabic words and phrases are of divine provenance and may not be separated from their Arabic forms. Based on al-Faruqi’s framework on Islamic English that proposes the use of Islamic vocabulary be retained in their Arabic form in an effort to maintain the original meanings, this study investigated postgraduate Muslim students’ perspective on whether there is a need for Islamic Arabic vocabulary to be incorporated in the teaching of English to Muslim learners. A survey consisting of open-ended questions was administered and the findings indicate that the respondents strongly favoured the incorporation of Islamic terms in English language teaching. This paper has pedagogical implications on ESL teachers who teach English to Muslim learners.

Keywords: vocabulary learning, Muslim English language learners, Islamic English
Introduction

That English is a global language that could tremendously benefit its learners and second language users has long been established. However, meanings as conveyed by words of a language is culturally shaped and as Sapir (1929) mentioned “language is primarily a cultural or social product and must be understood as such” (p. 213) and “no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality” (p. 209). This study is an investigation of words and their meanings in the context of religious representation. The study also concerns the need to incorporate Arabic words in the English language usage of Muslim learners.

Literature Review

The question as to whether language reflects a cultural worldview or language shapes the worldview of its users has led to a hypothesis that has been alternatively referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the Whorfian hypothesis, linguistic relativity or linguistic determinism. While linguistic determinism states that the language a person speaks determines the way that he or she interprets the world, linguistic relativism states that language merely influences a person’s thoughts about the real world. Although a debate on whether language shapes thought or thought shapes language has been taking place, most linguists today are more concerned with the fact that “language and culture interact, and worldviews among cultures differ, and that the language used to express that worldview may be relative and specific to that worldview” (Brown, 1986, p. 46).

Brown (1986) gives examples of how “words shape our lives” (p. 43). He points out that the advertising world uses words to shape, persuade and dissuade. “Weasel words”, he emphasizes, have the tendency to glorify very ordinary products into those that are “sparkling”, “refreshing” or even “scrumpdeliyicious”. In manufacturing, “enriched” or “fortified” products refer to food that has lost most of its nutrients during the manufacturing process. Brown also highlights how industry persuades people by using words like “receiving waters” which refers to lakes or rivers into which industrial wastes are dumped while the term “assimilative capacity” is used to indicate the amount of waste people can dump into the river before it starts to show.

Vygotsky (1986) and Szalay (1984), as cited in Lantolf (1999), agree that language is connected to a person’s worldview. Vygotsky distinguishes between conventional dictionary meaning (znachenie in Russian) and sense (smysl in Russian). To him, sense is

a dynamic, fluid, complex whole, which has several zones of unequal stability. Meaning (znachenie) is only one of the zones of sense, the most stable and precise zone. A word acquires its sense from the context in which it appears; in different contexts, it changes its sense. Meaning remains stable throughout the changes of sense. The dictionary meaning of a word is no more than a stone in the edifice of sense, no more than a potentiality that finds diversified realization in speech (p. 36).

Similarly, Szalay (1984) as cited in Lantolf (1999) differentiates between lexical and psychological meanings. While a word’s lexical meaning is fixed, its psychological meaning is fluid. He further elaborates by giving an example of the English word “drug”. While drug is
conventionally defined as “a substance with medicinal effects”, Szalay emphasizes that its psychological meaning varies from one person to another depending on the person’s experiences with the concept. Hence, to a Christian, drugs may have the connotation of hell, but for the addict, drugs may bring pleasure and heaven.

The difference in meaning from the Islamic perspective has also been highlighted by some scholars where it is generally agreed that since language reflects its worldview, it cannot detach itself from its relationship with the Creator. Al-Attas (1993) for instance, as cited in Asraf (1997), argues that knowledge to the Western people refers to what the rational mind can grasp of the rational and empirical world and it does not include the religious and the spiritual domains, which are relegated to the realm of faith and belief. This is in contrast with the Muslims’ conception of knowledge, which includes not only the “sensory and intelligible realms, but more importantly, the realm of the spirit” (al-Attas, cited in Asraf, p. 6). Similarly, the concept of happiness in Islam, represented by the Arabic word sa’adah, refers to “a permanent state of the soul when it has attained certainty concerning the most important matters in existence, through living in conformity with that certainty” (al-Attas, cited in Asraf, p. 7), is unlike in English and other Western languages, where happiness is considered mainly as the “fulfillment of physical and emotional needs, which are temporary and elusive”. In other words, Muslims aim to experience happiness in this world as well as in the Hereafter.

Ali (2001) analyzed the contents of two widely-read Malaysian English language newspapers, namely The New Strait Times and The Star, from late February to early April 2001 and highlighted twenty-five words like ‘goddess’, ‘prophet’, ‘idol’, ‘worship’, ‘miracle’, ‘followers’, ‘angel’ and ‘devil’, whose English definitions are not in line with the Islamic perspective. Since Islam espouses the oneness of God and the believe in all prophets as His messengers, words like “goddess” and “idol”, he argues, should not be used to refer to the object of worship. The word “worship”, on the other hand, should only be used with reference to God. Similarly, the word “prophet”, should not be used in a negative manner like “prophets of doom”, as Muslims have high respect for prophets. Ali also asserts that the word “followers” of Islam to be strictly used to refer to individuals who practice the teachings of Islam, rather than to individuals worshipping another individual. As for “angels” and “devils”, Ali insists the words are to be used with the original meanings and in a religious sense.

Based on the definitions provided by the New Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (NOALD, 2006), Othman and Ibrahim (2009) point out twenty-six English words which have meanings different from that which Muslims have ascribed to them. Words like alimony, dowry, bigamy, polygamy, funeral, martyr, ablution, fast, prophet, mother nature, nation, assisted suicide and missing link were found to be defined not in line with the Islamic point of view. The word “alimony”, for instance, is defined as “the money that a court orders somebody to pay regularly to their former wife or husband when the marriage is ended” (NOALD, 2006, p. 37). In Islam, the money must be paid by a husband to a wife, and not vice-verse. Similarly, “dowry” which refers to “money and/or property that in some societies, a wife or her family must pay to her husband when they get married; money and/or property that in some societies a husband must pay to his wife’s family when they get married” (NOALD, 2006, p.473) contradicts the meaning in Islam. In Islam, “dowry” or the Arabic mahr, is imposed on the husband to the wife, and not to the wife’s family. As mentioned by El Alami (1992, p. 107), “mahr is a gift or sum of money given by the husband to the wife in consideration of marriage”.

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Othman and Ibrahim (2009) further explain that “bigamy” and “polygamy” also do not have identical meanings as understood in Islam. While “bigamy” is defined as “a crime of marrying somebody when you are still legally married to somebody else” (NOALD, 2006, p. 137); “polygamy” is “the practice or custom of having more than one wife or husband at the same time” (p. 1163). Practised with clear Quranic conditions, Islam permits a man to marry more than one wife and in fact, he can marry up to four wives. This practice does not apply to women.

Similarly, the word “mother nature” which is defined as “the natural world, when you consider it as a force that affects the world and human beings” (NOALD, 2006, p. 763), also contradicts with the Islamic understanding. In Islam, it is Allah who creates all existence (including nature) and the only force that affects the world and human beings (Quranic verses, 7:54-58). Similarly, “missing link” which is defined as “An animal that is similar to humans that was once thought to exist at that time that apes were developing into human beings” (p. 751) is not in line with Islam which believes that our forefathers were created by Allah as a man and a woman and not apes. The Quran states, “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes” (49:13).

Al-Faruqi (1986), a renowned Muslim scholar who advocates Islamic English, has highlighted not only the presence of many words and concepts in the English language that do not correspond to the meaning held by Muslims, but more importantly, the words are unable to convey the meanings that Muslims intend to convey. This is due to the fact that many Arabic words are not accurately translatable into English. He argues that many of the meanings of Arabic words and phrases are of divine provenance and may not be separated from their Arabic forms. He gives examples of the words salah and zakat, which have been translated inaccurately.

Al-Faruqi (1986) disagrees when salah is translated as “prayer” in English. While prayer in English refers to “any communication with whatever is taken to be one’s god, even if that is an idol”, salah must be performed five times a day and “consists of precise recitations, genuflections, prostrations, standings and sittings with orientation towards the Ka’bah, and should be entered into only after ablutions and solemn declaration of intention or niyah” (al-Faruqi, p. 11). It is asserted that all the actions needed in performing salah cannot be compressed in the English word “prayer”.

Similarly, in discussing the term zakat, al-Faruqi (1986) expresses his concern when it is translated as charity, alms, poor-due or alms-giving. This is because the English words refer to “any act of voluntary, altruistic giving of anything useful in any amount, made with the intention of helping those in need”, which could correspond to the Arabic term sadaqah (al-Faruqi, p. 12). Zakat, although a kind of public welfare activity, is obligatory, and the amount of wealth to be given is specific. Hence, al-Faruqi (1986) insists that the Islamic vocabulary be retained in their Arabic form, as “to give an English translation of them is to reduce, and often to ruin those meanings” (p. 12). To him:

the English language stands in need of the precepts and values of Islam which only the Qur’anic language can provide. Constant use of their Arabic form will help to shield the English-speaking Muslims from the onslaught of materialism, utilitarianism, skepticism, relativism, secularism and hedonism that the last two hundred years have established firmly in English consciousness. And it will –
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Insha Allah – inject a reforming influence into the consciousness of all English speaking Muslims, pulling them out of their tragic predicament in modern times.

(al-Faruqi, 1986, p. 15)

Because of the limitations of English words in conveying Islamic concepts, al-Faruqi (1986) proposes Islamic English to “serve the linguistic needs of the Muslim users of the English language” (p. 7). Islamic English refers to “the modified English language to enable it to carry Islamic proper nouns and meanings without distortion” which involves “the infusion of religious, spiritual and cultural terms of Islam to modern English” (p. 7). Al-Faruqi advocates for the need to use Islamic English in English language classrooms to shield English speaking Muslims from the influence of negative culture and values.

Abdussalam (1999) concurs that for any language—not just English—to be used and spoken by Muslims, it needs to be “Islamised with features that enable it to convey Islamic belief, values, and heritage” (p. 15). He terms this as Islamic language. The concept of Islamic language or Muslim language has also been discussed by al-Attas (1991, p. 30) who mentions that Islamic languages refer to languages that the Muslim people are using, “consisting of key terms which governs the interpretation of the Islamic vision of reality and truth, and which project the worldview of Islam in correct perspective”.

Sharifian (1999) who concurs with the use of Al-Faruqi’s (1986) Islamic English observed in his study conducted in Australia that some Muslim students in ESL classes preferred to use words from either the language of their religion, which was Arabic, or their mother tongues, as they found it difficult to express certain concepts in English. The students found certain English words were “either not strong enough, irrelevant, or even inappropriate for conveying the meanings they intended to get across” (Sharifian, p. 3). Examples of concepts such as “clean”, “pray”, “fasting”, “greeting”, “marriage”, “faith”, “God”, and “intention” that take on specific meanings for Muslims are highlighted.

Othman (2006) also observed the use of Islamic terminologies in English classes. Since both the teachers and students who participated in the study were Muslims, they were at ease in using words like zakat, jihad, Ramadhan and ‘asr in their classes without any need for explanations. Othman and Hamid (2009) investigated teachers’ perspectives as to whether there was a need for Islamic Arabic vocabulary to be incorporated in the teaching of English to Muslim learners. The results revealed that a majority of the teachers encouraged the incorporation of Arabic words in class and in fact, they also believed that the students were receptive to the idea. Nonetheless, they used Arabic words in their English classes only when the need arose. They were also aware that some Arabic words were not translatable to English and some English words did not correspond to the meanings held by Muslims.

Mahboob (2009) highlights Pakistani English, a new variety of English which represents Islamic values in Pakistan. A documentary analysis of English language textbooks used in schools in Pakistan revealed chapters on Prophet Mohammed, Islam and Hajj. In his linguistic analyses, Mahboob points out to the presence of Islamic greetings like Al-Salam ‘alaykum, and words of praise and appreciation, e.g. Masha-Allah and Alhamdulillah which were found not only in personal exchanges, but also in public discourses, e.g. on radio and television shows as well as political and other speeches. In discourse structures, he identified the Arabic phrase Bismillahi-Rahmanir-Raheem (I begin in the name of Allah who is the most Gracious and the most
Merciful) in the Arabic text written in the preface of English language textbooks used in schools in Pakistan. He emphasizes that this represents the Islamic tradition of starting all things in the name of Allah. He reiterates that “the use of Arabic – and not its English translation – shows the iconic power of this text and its relationship to Islamic values and systems” (p. 185). The explicit praise of Allah is also seen in the acknowledgements written in 18 MA theses submitted to an English department at an urban university in Pakistan in 2006. Mahboob concludes how Pakistani English has been linguistically and culturally adapted to local cultural and religious norms to reflect a form of linguistic resistance to carry a Pakistani Muslim identity.

Considering the emphasis placed by Muslim scholars, specifically the late al-Faruqi (1986) who advocates Islamic English, this study aimed to investigate Malaysian students’ perspective on the use of Islamic Arabic vocabulary in English lessons.

**Objective**

The main objective of this study was to investigate students’ perspective on the incorporation of Islamic Arabic vocabulary in the teaching of English to Muslim learners.

**Research questions**

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. Do students see the need for Islamic Arabic vocabulary to be included in the teaching of English to Muslim learners?

2. What are the possible problems in incorporating Islamic Arabic words in the teaching of English?

**Methodology**

The study employed a survey design with open-ended questions provided to the respondents. The respondents were 50 post graduate Muslim students who were enrolled in English Language Studies Master’s programme at the International Islamic University Malaysia. After having obtained their consent to be involved in the survey, the students spent a minimum of 30 minutes to respond to the questions. The emerging themes from the students’ responses are discussed below. The questionnaire is attached in the appendix.

**Findings**

Research Question 1 of the study is “Do students see the need for Islamic Arabic vocabulary to be included in the teaching of English to Muslim learners?” All respondents strongly saw the need for Islamic Arabic vocabulary to be included in the teaching of English to Muslim learners.

*Clarity of meaning*

The students believed that Islamic Arabic words were “more complete” and provided “clear, specific and detailed definitions and explanations”. An example of what was considered as inadequacy of English words was pointed out as follows:

> There are some terms in Islam that are inadequate in meaning if they are literally translated into English. For example, the word “prayer” in English does not show even a
close resemblance of its meaning from the Islamic point of view. Prayer in English dictionaries refers to the act of praying to God, where a person needs to kneel down on the ground and performs his prayer. This is not in line with what prayer should mean in Islam. In Islam, a “prayer” is not just a “dua’a” but also an act of worship to Allah performed five times a day, with particular actions involved in the “salah” (prayer) starting from niyya to takbiratul ihram, standing still and reciting surah Al-Fatihah until the last action that is giving salaam which includes turning one’s head to the right.

Not only that English words do not convey the meanings intended by Muslims, but more importantly, some Arabic words do not have their equivalent in English which would lead to the loss of intended meanings as highlighted by the majority of the respondents. Below were some of the responses given:

… their translation may result in a dramatic loss or transformation of meaning. This loss or alteration may pose grave hazards for readers as the meaning is conveyed wrongly in Islamic terms. The word “jihad” for example is stripped of its many crucial aspects of meaning and is introduced as “holy war”. Therefore, to preserve the meaning, Arabic words should be used unsparingly in English whenever the need arises for it.

Similarly, another view of the respondents was as follows,

Arabic words should be included in the teaching of English because some Islamic Arabic terminology cannot be replaced by English words; in the sense that the English words might be inferior to the Arabic terms. For example, in the Muslim marriage, akad is important because the word explains that the marriage is in line with the teaching Islam. However, the English word “marriage” does not include this.

Another respondent agreed and pointed out that the inaccurate translation would have the tendency to confuse students and affect their understanding and application of the terms. Arabic words should be assimilated in the teaching of English due to the fact that translated Arabic words in English do not contain all the meanings that the words should have. Therefore,

… in order to retain the meaning, it is highly recommended that Arabic words be incorporated, for instance, the word “prayer” and salah. Prayer is translated from salah but the meaning of salah is entirely different from “prayer”. Prayer is simply translated as the act of supplication, act of worshipping. The accurate translation is crucial because students (Muslims especially) tend to get confused with the meaning of translated Arabic words. As a result, they might believe the meaning. For example, “prayer” as mentioned is defined as the “act of supplication or requesting of help from God” but salah is an act of worshipping based on certain manners outlined by Islam and compulsory on every Muslim 5 times daily. Therefore, if Muslim students take the meaning of “prayer” as simply du’a, they are indeed not performing the very fundamental teaching of Islam. Thus, it leads to moral repercussion.

The confusion caused by not using Arabic words was also highlighted by another respondent;

… they call hajj pilgrimage but the western definition of pilgrimage even includes Hindus’ visits to the temples in India. As put forward by Al-Faruqi, we must include
these Islamic vocabulary in ELT. It would be blasphemous to view *hajj* in the same light as visiting the Vatican.

Using Arabic words would provide accurate meanings of terms and give a deeper impact on Muslims;

> Are *akhlak* and *adab* equivalent to the words “behavior” or “values”? I believe it will have a better impact if they are in Arabic. Another instance would be the word God instead of Allah. Using the same term as used by the west in teaching English especially to the young ones will somehow inculcate this belief that all gods are the same when the fact is that Allah is beyond the ordinary.

Another respondent agreed with the previous view by saying that,

> … by keeping a few Arabic words in English language, the message would be accurate. For example, instead of using the word missionary, we use *daie*. Even though both words convey the same meaning, “missionary” is normally associated with Christianity. *Daie* is the exact word to be used for an Islamic preacher.

One of the respondents emphasized that the Islamic vocabulary should only be used where equivalent terms or words are absent in English. She gave an example of *adab* which is mainly used in a teacher-student interaction to define “respectful relationship” or “ethical interaction”. She added that *adab* is a comprehensive word to describe a physiological act that might not be successfully defined by a single word from the English vocabulary.

**Cultural effects**

The second important reason as to why Arabic vocabulary should be incorporated in English language teaching is due to the possible cultural effects of the English vocabulary, as seen in the following responses;

There are potential cultural effects that accompany the learning process. This is possible because learning a language like English is learning about the culture of the native speakers as well. Therefore, it is very important to use Islamic vocabulary so that Muslim learners of English language will not be influenced by the western culture which is so different from Muslim’s way of life that is so much related to Islam. The word “freedom” for instance, is defined as our individual ability to do whatever we want without anyone stopping us. This definition is of course not suitable for Muslims because Islam has different perception about freedom. To begin with, Muslims have roles to play and fulfill as the vicegerent or *khalifah* of Allah. In our life, we are always required to pray and fast and refrain ourselves from committing sins. This is important because our life is always governed by Islam and the concept of *halal* or *haram*. Hence, it is not right to view freedom the way the westerners do because Muslims do not have the total freedom to do whatever we wish like the westerners propagate us to do. This example and explanation shows that the westerners’ definitions of words are not suitable for Muslims and thus must be amended so that they can be changed to suit the Islamic concept and way of life.

One of the responses highlighted the relationship between English language and Christianity;
The importance of advocating Islamic vocabulary in English language is of high priority. … language, culture and religion have been known to be interrelated with each other. English then is very much interrelated with the Christian faith and the culture of the west. Mastery in this language is an eventual mastery of its counterparts. Therefore, with the emergence of Islamic English, one is free from the association of Christianity and the west.

Another respondent shared the same view;

We should use Islamic vocabulary in teaching English to Muslim learners so that the learners are familiar with our own vocabulary that gives specific meanings especially in practicing Islam as a way of life. We don’t want the Muslim learners to be manipulated by the western ideas in understanding certain words which might affect their *aqidah*.

Similarly, the respondents believe that the incorporation of Islamic Arabic vocabulary would protect students from being influenced by the western culture. This is reflected in the following responses;

… we should definitely include Islamic vocabulary in ELT as to not allow students to go astray in their overall knowledge of Islam due to misinterpretation or mistranslation of Islamic vocabulary in its original form, which is in the Arabic language into the English language. This is extremely important so that the student’s knowledge of Islamic terminology and concepts will be of an authentic one, rather than a fabricated one. I strongly believe that ELT should not compromise the authenticity of Islam, in its very essence, as being conveyed by Islamic vocabulary and terminology.

…the knowledge and materials in ELT can be considered as very secular as they basically come from the western point of view. English is the language of the west. So, it carries the western culture for example in words like holy, goddess, miracle, absolute and many more. Thus, there is an urgent need to instill Islamic vocabulary in countries where most of the students are Muslims such as in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Due to the intricate relationship between language and culture, one respondent wanted the English language used by the Muslims to reflect Islamic culture;

Yes, English is a foreign language, a language of the west but there is nothing wrong in making it ours by including some of the words that are Islamic in origin and nature. This would adhere to the fact that all languages reflect culture. Therefore the English that is used by Muslims should reflect the culture of the Muslims.

Another response highlighted about restoring Islamic heritage in the educational system. The respondent says “Our Islamic educational system has been attacked. In order to restore our Islamic heritage in the educational fields, it is crucial that we include Islamic vocabulary in ELT”.

*Enhancement of Islamic knowledge*

The third main reason why respondents would also want Islamic Arabic vocabulary to be incorporated in ELT is because they would be able to enhance their knowledge about Islam. This is seen in the following responses;
… when Islamic vocabulary is used, students will also be able not only to learn vocabulary but also they can learn and enhance their knowledge about Islam. Based on this, Islamic vocabulary must be incorporated in all subjects and not only English because all subjects require the use of language, so that the benefits can be extended to all disciplines.

…we can understand and comprehend the meaning better. For instance, in the concept of marriage, Muslim has words like *akad* which gives a deeper meaning of the term. Besides that, in the process of learning, there are certain values that are being inserted in it. Western people for example, include their belief and values to their language, English. Thus, I think that we also should include Islamic Arabic words that we have, so that in the process of learning English, we are not only learning that language but knowledge about Islam as well.

Another respondent highlighted the lack of Islamic knowledge among students;

> It is also important to use Islamic Arabic words as it will introduce the students to the Islamic values of the words. This is because most students especially in English class are not really aware of Islamic Arabic words and how words are defined or explained according to Islam.

Other responses include “Muslims learners can increase not only their understanding of Islamic concepts but they can also apply the concepts to become better Muslims”, “By incorporating Arabic words, Muslim learners will become more aware of the correct definition of words and this will correct our learners’ understanding of Islamic terminologies”, “incorporating Arabic words in learning English will give extra information for the students about certain words” and “by incorporating Arabic words, we unconsciously spread the terms among Muslims which will later be innate within them. When they have understood, there is a tendency that they will implement the knowledge and make it a way of life”.

**Correcting misconceptions and spreading the message of Islam**

The fourth main reason as to why Islamic Arabic words should be incorporated in ELT is to correct misconception about Islam and to spread the message of Islam. Two main responses are as follows:

The fact that some of the Islamic vocabulary have not been defined accurately by the west is a very strong reason for these terms to be introduced in ELT. In this case, the role of teachers or instructors is very important to reintroduce and clarify the meanings of the terms. Teachers or instructors should make use of this opportunity to correct the misconception and misunderstanding towards some of these terms, for example, the word *jihad*, that exist in the minds of their students. However, in playing this important role, the teachers and instructors themselves must be equipped with the deep understanding of the Islamic vocabulary.

We should maintain the Arabic words in English teaching so that we can present positive impression to non-Muslim learners. Nowadays, the west has viewed the Muslim negatively and Islamic education can play its role in changing that impression. The example of “jihad” can be used. As the teacher uses or maintains the word in English
teaching, she can also explain what is meant by “jihad”. It is not brutal murder like what is known by the non-Muslims but a sacred holy war that starts within us first.

*The present use of Arabic in English*

Finally, the fact that Arabic words have already been incorporated in the English Language has been one of the main reasons the respondents insisted for Islamic Arabic vocabulary to be employed in English language teaching. A student highlighted that “the dictionaries are full of Arabic originated words such as ‘jihad’”. Another student pointed out the need for any language to evolve according to the present situation. To him “the current situation clearly indicates that English language needs to evolve as well.” He gave an example of the increased demand for Islamic banking system;

Muslim countries are becoming more active in today’s economic market. The setting up of Islamic banks around the world (including in western secular countries) shows that they embrace this Islamic finance system positively. Since this is new to them, they might find it hard to understand the whole concept since Islamic finance systems is so comprehensive. To use the current English to explain these Islamic concepts in Islamic finance is almost impossible. That is why Muslim scholars should participate in an active role to incorporate Arabic words into the teaching of English as this process will ensure better understanding for our next generation especially for those who are from secular background.

Furthermore, another respondent reiterated that the English language is an assimilation of various languages such as Spanish and French. “If the language is able to retain some of the Spanish and French words, it should not hurt if it incorporates some Arabic words. It would do more justice to the Arabic language and the meanings as well”. Similarly, “Islam is well-known in this world. If other languages can be absorbed and used widely in English language, why can’t Arabic?”

In short, all respondents strongly saw the need for Islamic Arabic vocabulary to be included in the teaching of English to Muslim learners due to the inaccurate translations and definitions in dictionaries and the absence of equivalent words in English. There was also the question of the potential cultural effects of the English vocabulary on impressionable Muslim learners. The incorporation of Arabic Islamic words would also enhance the learners’ knowledge about Islam, correct the now increasing misconceptions about Islam and spread the message of Islam. Finally, the respondents were of the opinion that the borrowing of words from one language to another had been taking place for as long as people of different tribes and backgrounds have mingled. The fact is that some Arabic words too have already been part of the English Language.

Research Question 2 of the study is “What are the possible problems in incorporating Islamic Arabic words in the teaching of English?”

*Differences in meaning of Islamic Arabic words and dictionary definitions*

The first problem concerns differences in the meaning of Islamic Arabic words and dictionary definitions. Two respondents pointed out the fact that the meanings of some Arabic words as defined in some dictionaries are not in line with Islamic perspective. In answering the survey question posed to them, one of them mentioned that, “definition of these words, because most of
the dictionaries (English dictionaries) are published in the west. It is not surprising that the meanings of these Arabic words are not correct”. The respondent even suggested steps for Muslims to take in ensuring that the meanings of each word are in line with what Islam perceives.

Another respondent emphasized that incorporating Islamic Arabic words in the teaching of English could be problematic when people rely on the definitions in English dictionaries and do not define Arabic words through the eyes of Islam. She stated,

… Unfortunately, the Islamic Arabic terms used in dictionaries now define the words based on how others see the Muslim world, not through the eyes of the Muslims themselves. I believe that such words should be introduced in the teaching of English, but it has to be defined with care and caution so as not to mislead anybody. Some may take it for granted that because the words are Arabic in nature, the definitions in the dictionaries are presumed to be Islamically correct.

The respondent also emphasized that the method of borrowing Arabic terms into English needs to be monitored.

Understanding difficulties caused by high frequency of Arabic words

The second problem that has been mentioned is the difficulties for others to understand English as used by Muslims should too many Arabic words be incorporated in the English language. One respondent highlighted this point when she said that “to put too many Arabic terms in the English language would be to clone it as another dialect of Arabic and that is not our purpose”. This is because, according to her, many Islamic words are Arabic in origin. “If there are too many Arabic terms in the language, it will be difficult for our western counterparts to understand us and as a result our communication with them will be affected”. The respondent’s concern is valid as successful communication is still the main objective of language users. To incorporate words belonging to another language into the main language may result in a variety that could be exclusive to very few people of the same interests.

Cultural ignorance

The third problem that is of concern here is that the well-meaning practice of incorporating Arabic Islamic words could lead to students’ ignorance of the western culture. A respondent said, “I do not believe that we should wholly incorporate Arabic words in the teaching of English to Muslim learners” as “we need to build awareness of other cultures”. Another respondent gave an example, “if teenagers aren’t aware of what “wine” means, then what would happen if they stumble across a real bottle of wine not knowing what it is?” Indeed, the learning of cultural nuances of a language is important in this globalization era. One, as a devout Muslim, may disapprove of alcoholic drinks and their consumption but to Islamicise a language and the learning of a language to the extent that it may produce ignorant users of that language who do not possess adequate vocabulary to communicate with users of various backgrounds will not abode well with the Islamic belief of respect and tolerance of all God’s creations.

Pronunciation of Arabic words

The next problem is in terms of pronunciation. A respondent highlighted the need for the Arabic terms to be pronounced accurately. She states, “If the Arabic terms do become part of the
English language, then teachers of English have to be taught the right pronunciation of these terms as the right pronunciation is crucial. The wrong pronunciation will alter the meanings of these Arabic words”.

In short, some of the possible problems as foreseen by the respondents are differences in the meaning of Islamic Arabic words and dictionary definitions, difficulties for others to understand English as used by Muslims should too many Arabic words be incorporated in the English language, the well-meaning practice of incorporating Islamic Arabic words could lead to students’ ignorance of the western culture, and pronunciation.

Conclusion

Based on the emerging themes of the students’ responses, it can be concluded that they see the need to incorporate Islamic Arabic vocabulary in the teaching of English to Muslim learners. In line with al-Faruqi’s (1986) framework, the need for the incorporation is due to the inaccurate translations and definitions in dictionaries and the absence of equivalent words in English. The fact that language is a carrier of culture (Corder, 1973) and therefore language and culture are intertwined and inseparable (Alptekin, 1993; Lado, 1957; Sapir, 1929) has led the respondents to mention the need to curb potentially negative cultural effects of the English vocabulary. The respondents also highlighted the need to enhance learners’ knowledge about Islam and the fact that some Arabic words have already been part of the English Language. Although some of the responses and thoughts may not be well-received in cultures where Islam is not dominant, the findings are of value to educators or language instructors who are sensitive to the role of languages in molding a person’s thoughts and personality. The findings also indicate the relevance of the Sapir-Whorfian arguments on whether language shapes thoughts or vice-versa and illuminate the cultural and theological paradox faced by both learners and instructors in the teaching and learning process.

In terms of the practical and pedagogical implications of the study, materials based on Islamic Arabic vocabulary need to be developed and used in English language classes. Apart from that, the choice of language instructors will also need to be carefully considered. The first, however, would require material developers who understand the need to teach Islamic Arabic vocabulary to Muslim learners and the potential complexity of this effort. This, in reality, may take a long time unless there is no hindrance in funding such material development projects where experts of various related fields could converge and work together.

What is even more crucial is the need to train potential teachers of the theoretical aspects of the issue and the requirements in preparing them to impart knowledge to students which include training them how to pronounce Arabic words correctly. The fact is that the ability to speak the Arabic language well would better ensure the success in incorporating those selected words. Teachers do have to know the meanings of the lexical items as understood in Islam and avoid reliance on the definitions given in English dictionaries.

It is acknowledged that this study has explored a tiny fraction of the issues concerning language, culture and faith of Islamic language (Abdussalam, 1999) or Islamic English (al-Faruqi, 1986). Further studies in this area which could include explorations on figurative or metaphoric expressions of English need to be carried out. The research is needed in order to investigate the reception to the idea of Islamic English by other parties involved in the teaching of Muslim
English language learners. It concurs with Lee (2003, p.10) that there is “a distinctively inseparable relationship between language, culture and identity.”

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References


Appendix (Questionnaire on Students’ Perception on Incorporating Arabic Words in English Language Teaching)

1. Have you taken the course on Islamization of Knowledge (IOK)? Yes / No

2. What do you understand by the concept “Islamic English”?

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3. In your view, should we incorporate Arabic words in the teaching of English to Muslim learners? Please provide three main reasons and explain them.

1.________________________________________________________________________

2.________________________________________________________________________

3.________________________________________________________________________