

Being English Teachers in Malaysian Islamic Schools: Identity Narratives from a Five Year 'Life Journey'

Airil Haimi Mohd Adnan

Department of English and Linguistics

Academy of Language Studies

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Seri Iskandar Campus

Perak, Malaysia

Abstract

Malaysia's national school system is a reflection of the diversity of Malaysians. Instead of a single unitary system, the formal school system in Malaysia consists of national schools for all young Malaysians, national type schools (for Mandarin and Tamil speaking students) and also national religious schools (or *sekolah kebangsaan agama*) that focus on Islamic education for the Muslim majority group. From informal Islamic schools (or *sekolah pondok*) of the past, today's national religious schools continue to play a critical role in educating young Malaysians. Nevertheless, these schools are facing difficult challenges to remain relevant in a rapidly developing society. One of these difficulties relates to English language teaching. In national religious schools where Islamic education and Arabic language are given priority, teaching English as a core subject becomes a real challenge; some students deliberately resist learning English as it is a 'Western' language and some teachers view English teachers as the 'Other' within these schools. This research article is based on a longitudinal effort to study these difficult challenges and to shed light on the lived experiences of English teachers in Malaysia's national Islamic schools. Drawing on 'thick' narrative data from face-to-face interviews, written narrative accounts, and informal online and mobile exchanges, this article deals with the 'stories' of becoming and being an English teacher within Malaysian Islamic schools. The stories and co-constructed narratives unveil the feelings, experiences and aspirations of two 'Bumiputera' Malay-Muslim English teachers, one female and one male, in the last five years of their professional lives.

Keywords: English teachers, identity construction, Islamic schools, Malaysian education, narrative research

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