

Islamic Literature: Instructional Strategies in Contemporary Indonesia

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Abstract

Although Islamic literature has gained serious attention by Islamic world since 1940s, it has not yet taken a significant place in the world literature, let alone in the English language research areas. For its opponents, Islamic literature is not yet underpinned by a solid definition, while for its proponents, Islamic literature needs further exploration in the sense of its instructional implication. This article seeks to strengthen the existence of Islamic literature by offering its theological and social grounds as well as by proposing possible instructional strategies of using the Islamic literature in teaching English within the contemporary Indonesian context. Research method including R & D and a library research were employed to collect and analyze the data. This study finds that Islamic literature has a strong theological ground and a long established social ground. It is also found that using appropriate visuals, high text exploitability, and relevant glosses are among the effective instructional strategies.

Keywords: *Islamic literature, English language teaching, visuals, intertextuality, glosses*

Abstrak

Meskipun telah mendapat perhatian serius dari dunia Islam sejak 1940-an, sastra Islami belum mendapat tempat yang signifikan di kancah sastra dunia dan terlebih di area penelitian Bahasa Inggris. Di mata para penyanggahnya, sastra Islami belum dilengkapi dengan definisi yang solid, sedang bagi para pendukungnya, sastra Islami perlu ditopang oleh eksplorasi lanjut terkait dengan implikasi pembelajarannya. Tulisan ini mencoba memperkuat eksistensi sastra Islami dengan mengajukan pijakan teologis dan sosial dari sastra Islami serta kemungkinan strategi pembelajarannya dalam pengajaran Bahasa Inggris di Indonesia kekinian. Metode penelitian pengembangan dan studi pustaka digunakan dalam pengumpulan dan pengolahan data. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa sastra Islami memiliki pijakan teologis yang kuat serta pijakan sosial yang mapan. Temuan lainnya adalah bahwa penggunaan visualisasi yang sesuai, teks yang eksploitatif, dan 'glosses' yang relevan merupakan strategi pembelajaran yang efektif.

Kata Kunci: *Sastra Islami, pengajaran Bahasa Inggris, visualisasi, interteks, glosses*

A. Introduction

Literature has been long connected to 'religious domain' (Moody, 1971: 4); spiritual guidance (Showalter, 2012); knowledge (*ilm*) and the experience of knowledge (*ma'rifa*) (Abdullah, 2018). A specific term used to depict a strong connection between literature and religion is called didactic literature (Abrams, 1999). From this point of view, the term *Islamic literature* should be sensible.

Islamic literature refers to all genres of literary works written, in any language, within the Islamic perspective (Hassan, 2016). Among the notable international works of Islamic literature are those written by Hafez, Rumi, and Iqbal (Abdullah, 2018). Within Indonesian contexts, some figures like Hamzah Fansuri, Sanusi Pane, Amir Hamzah are considered to be among the poets connected to the existence of the so-termed Islamic literature of Archipelago (*kesusastraan Islam Nusantara*) (Muthari, 2016). *Kesusastraan Islam Nusantara* is deemed Islamic literature for it is underpinned by the Islamic values, and is therefore an evidence of a long established existence of the Islam literature in Indonesia. Within the context of traditional Malay

literature, most Islamic literatures are aimed at curing human's soul overwhelmed by the bitterness of life or by excessive impact of love and sorrow (Braginsky, 2004). Thus, Islamic literature is internationally and locally self-evident.

Nevertheless, previous studies still suggest three main problems related to the existence of Islamic literature. *First*, the term Islamic literature is still debatable and problematic within Indonesian context. A plenty Indonesian literary works are not categorized as Islamic literature although they resonate similar messages and characteristics to the Islamic literature (Rokib, 2016). *Second*, most of literary works counted as Islamic literature are written in English (Kubarek, 2016), yet they are not yet warmly welcomed in most of the English departments of the Islamic countries (Areqi, 2016). *Third*, the instructional manifestation of Islamic literature (*literatur keislaman*) into classroom, such as through learning materials, is often ignored in the midst of Indonesian scholarly discussion (Hasan, 2018). These facts raise problems on the nature of Islamic literature and on the need to accentuate the instructional strategies of utilizing Islamic literature in English language teaching.

This article is, therefore, aimed at: (1) exploring the nature of Islamic literature by clarifying its theological ground and social grounds. Such clarification is needed to set a common ground on what constitutes Islamic literature; and (2) offering the instructional strategies of Islamic literature. That is by exploring the strategies which are possibly used to enhance the acceptability of the Islamic literature.

Not only do the findings of this research make the existence of Islamic literature self-evident and solid among the world art studies, but they also provide a practical instructional implication of the Islamic literature to teach English in contemporary Indonesian context particularly in the Islam-affiliated universities.

B. Method/Material

This article is an extended version of the writer's dissertation, which was originally written within a Research and Development (R & D) design, on *Developing a Literature-Based Reading Instructional Model for Students of the English Language Department at Islam-Affiliated University* (Irwansyah, 2018). The R & D design followed the four main steps proposed by Borg & Gall (1983): studying relevant literature and research findings, developing educational product, field-testing the developed product, and revising the product. A questionnaire, interview, and test were used to develop and validate the product. Three experts, five English lecturers, and thirty-three students were involved in the assessment of the developed educational product. For the purpose of this publication, a descriptive method, in the form of library research, was carried out following the R & D design so as to sharpen the theoretical grounds and empirical findings of the Islamic literature.

C. Result and Discussion

1. Nature of Islamic Literature

In the broadest sense, the term Islamic literature refers to “a committed literature with the aim of propagating an Islamic vision of the world” (Çayir, 2016, p.xxi). Any piece of literary work presenting Islamic culture and values; containing concepts derived from the principles and teachings of Islam; and valuing artistic aspects of a literary work, belongs to Islamic literature (Arequi, 2016). Islamic literature, which covers all genres and all languages, should be evocative of the messages of Allah *subhaanahu wa ta'aala* (meaning the most glorified; henceforth SWT) to His servants (Hassan, 2016). It also covers all literary works creatively written by Moslems although the contents of the work do not directly talk about the teachings of Islam (Poeradisastira, 2008). For those who are literate in English, Islamic literature is easily connected to such works as *Arabian Night* and *Rubaiyat of Umar Kayam* (Kritzeck, 1964). Islamic literature embraces all literary works, although

written by non-Muslims, containing universal spiritual values which are not against the Islamic principles and doctrines (Kubarek, 2016).

It is evident that the term Islamic literature covers all genres of literary work, written in any language and by any writer, that in tune with the spiritual values, principles, doctrines, and teachings of Islam without ignoring the aesthetical aspects of the works. The term has been recognized in the Arab and Muslim world as well as in the Western world.

The use of Islamic literature, particularly the story of Nasreddin Hodja, has been introduced by a few scholars in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). Lie (1999) utilizes the story of Nasreddin Hodja to emphasize the importance of cooperative learning in ELT. Sullivan (2002), for example, argues that the stories of Nasreddin Hodja is relevant to ELT; and Clark (2004) maintains that the stories of Nasreddin Hodja can serve as basis to design interesting English language classroom activities. Further exploration of the Islamic literature in the English language classrooms should deserve English language teachers in Islam-affiliated educational institutions.

a. The theological ground

As something valuable, Islamic literature is underpinned by theological ground referring to the Holy Qur'an and the prophetic tradition. Hamid (1990) states that among the verses serving as the foundation of Islamic literature (*kesusasteraan Islam*) are "Read: And your Lord is the Most Generous. He who taught by the pen. Taught man what he never knew. (Qur'an 96: 3-5)", and "Say, "Look at what is in the heavens and the earth." But signs and warnings are of no avail for people who do not believe. (Qur'an 10: 101)". While the prophetic traditions that support the existence of Islamic literature are: "The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr."; "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave"; and "The word of wisdom is the lost property of the believer. Wherever he finds it, then he is most

deserving of it.” It seems clear that Islamic literature is theologically rooted in three activities namely reading, writing, and seeking for wisdom.

The Qur’an itself, as the main theological ground of the Islamic literature, contains many stories presented in several terms. Salehi (2016) notes that the term story should encompass such words as *qhasas*, *naba’*, and *hadith*. Qur’anic verses containing one of those words might stand as the ground of Islamic literature. They include: *Nahnu naqussu ‘alaika ahsanal qhasasi bimaa awhainaa ilaika haadzaa al-qur’an* (We relate to you, (O Muhammad), the best of stories in what We have revealed to you of this Qur’an) (Qur’an 12: 3); *Tilka min anbaa alghaibi nuuhiihaa ilaika....* (That is from the news of the unseen which We reveal to you....) (Qur’an 11:49); and *Wahal ataaka haditsu muusaa* (And has the story of Moses reached you?) (Qur’an 20: 9). Apart from the various words used to denote the word story, one point which is worth noting is that the stories in the Qur’an are the best ones.

Some of the Qur’anic verses which call upon the important use of stories are: (Qur’an 12: 3) as has been previously touched upon; (Qur’an 12: 111) *“In their stories is a lesson for those who possess intelligence. This is not a fabricated tale, but a confirmation of what came before it, and a detailed explanation of all things, and guidance, and mercy for people who believe.”* (Itani, n.d.: 89); (Qur’an 7: 176) *“...So tell the tale, so that they may ponder.”* (Itani, n.d.: 61). It is obvious that Moslem educationists are encouraged to incorporate the stories found in the Qur’an, particularly, and the Islamic literature generally through any possible schemes.

Further, Islamic literature has its roots in the story of the Prophet Muhammad *shollallahu ‘alaihi wa sallam* (meaning peace be upon him; henceforth PBUH) when the Prophet PBUH requested Hasan bin Thabet to defend Muslims and their values from the Quraish poets' criticism (Arequi, 2016). This fact shows the social, if not political, function of the Islamic literature as a vehicle to oppose those who attack Muslims literarily.

b. The social ground

It is worth noting that the rise of Islamic literature, particularly in the Arab world in 1980s, was aimed at opposing secular values and moral degradation brought by the Western literature (Kubarek, 2016). While in the Indonesian context, Islamic literature is often viewed as a counter-attack against the so-termed fragrant literature (*sastra wangi* or *sastra selangkangan*) which expressing vulgar and pornographic content. The fragrant literature—with Dinar Ayu, Dewi Lestari, and Ayu Utami as its leading writers—dominated the circulating literary texts in Indonesia in 1990s to the early 2000s (Rokib, 2016). It is in such spirit of opposition, Islamic literature becomes an instrument to propagate the values, principles, and teachings of Islam.

The following table presents some important events in Middle East, Indonesia, and Europe, related to the rise of Islamic literature. The information within Table 1. is adapted from Kubarek (2016); Rokib (2016), and Muthari (2016):

Table 1.

Remarkable Events of Islamic Literature

Years	Events	Remarks
1928	Hasan Al-Banna founded Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928	Reinterpreted the traditional definition of <i>dakwah</i> by strengthening the position literature
1940's	Sayyid Qutb (the subsequent leader of Muslim Brotherhood)	Propagated the use of literature as an effective instrument of missionary work (<i>dakwah</i>)
1940's & 1950's	Sayyid Qutb & Alim Abu al-Hasan Nadwi	Advocated the development of Islamic literature (<i>al-adab al-islami</i>)
1970's	Massive exploration of Islamic tradition and arts in Indonesia	Islamic values colored visuals arts and literary texts through the works of Kuntowijoyo, Emha Ainun Nadjib, K.H. Mustofa Bisri, Amri Yahya, etc
1984	Alim Abu al-Hasan Nadwi founded the International League of Islamic Literature	<i>Islamic literature</i> became more popular in the Arab and the Muslim world
1997	The emergence of Pen Circle Forum (<i>Forum Lingkar Pena</i>) in Indonesia	Islamic literature mushroomed bookstores in Indonesia
2005	The emergence of Islamic Writers Alliance (IWA) in USA	Rejecting the vulgar, un-Islamic, and sexually explicit content

As shown in Table 1., the rise of Islamic literature in Indonesia occurred, at least, within two waves. The first wave, 1970's, seemed to have no direct influence from the notion of *al-adab al-islami* propagated by the leaders of Muslim Brotherhood. Islamic literature-- with all its variances such as prophetic literature, transcendental literature, sufism literature, *suluk* literature, remembrance literature (*sastra zikir*)— emerged to respond the lack of suitable spiritual contemplation found in the Western literature and in the most existing works of Indonesian writers (Muthari, 2016). The second wave, early 2000-s, seemed to resonate the ideas of Muslim Brotherhood of using Islamic literature as a vehicle to spread Islamic teachings and to oppose un-Islamic values embedded within other literary works.

While Islamic literature has gained its momentum since 1970-s, and being strengthened in early 2000-s, another challenge awaiting is to design more instructional strategies. For the purpose of this article, the term 'instructional strategy' refers to the implementation of a research-based learning materials utilizing Islamic literature to teach English in the Islam-affiliated universities in contemporary Indonesia.

2. Instructional Strategies of Islamic Literature

Prior to the instructional strategies, a recognition of three major approaches to the use of Islamic literature in a language classroom is needed. First, literature as study, or *teaching about* literature, focuses on the investigation of canonical texts, writers' influences, and critical view towards the works. Second, literature as resource, or *teaching with* literature, uses literary texts as vehicle to teach language. Third, literature as appropriation, or *learning through* literature, emphasizes the appropriation of literature to meet the students' learning purposes such as by, among others, performing text, creating students' own text, and implementing (Maley, 2012). It is worth noting that those three approaches should not exclude each other in that a practitioner might use them singly or alternately. Having determined a teaching approach, a teacher might consider providing prompting visuals, increasing text exploitability, and designing relevant glosses.

a. Providing prompting visuals

Visuals might refer to font size, layout, and illustration. They should be used to support the content of the Islamic literature used to teach English. While the font size and the layout should be easy on the eyes, the illustration should provide the students with historical background, cultural setting, and relevant prior knowledge. Figure 1. shows some samples of visuals used in this study.

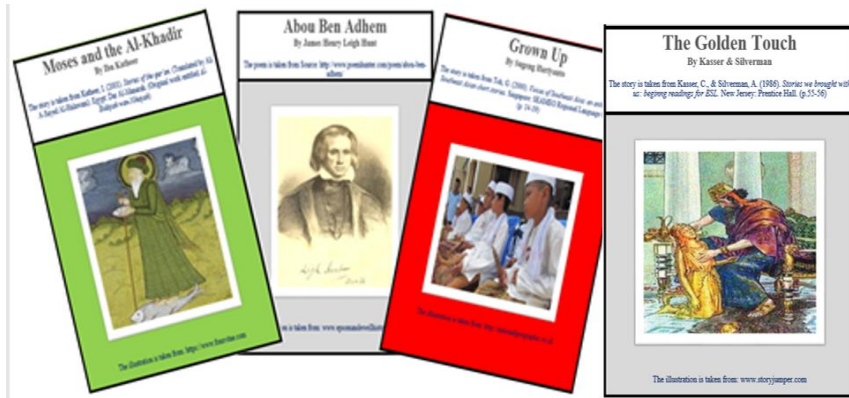


Figure 1. *The Visuals of Islamic Literature*

The visuals, particularly the illustration, in Figure 1. were appreciated by the researcher, by inserting relevant pictures or drawings, so as to help students anticipate the possible content of the Islamic literature. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the visuals might be prompting from the researcher’s, experts’ and practitioners’ point of views, but might not be so from the students’ perspectives. Figure 2. highlights the students’ responses toward the visuals of the developed learning materials.

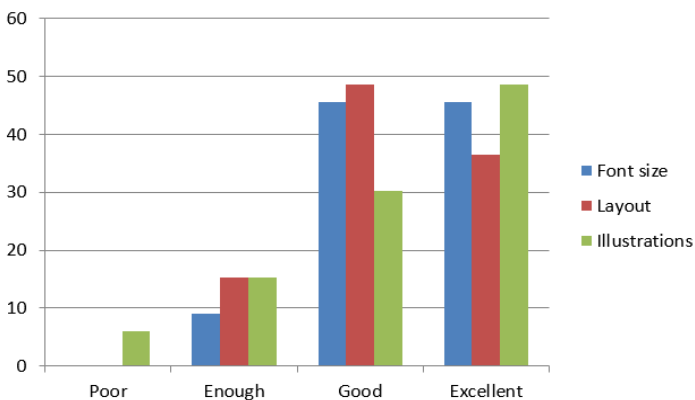


Figure 2. *Students’ Assessment toward the Visuals*

It was obvious that illustrations should deserve more attention as few students extremely thought them poor. A more colorful and modern design of

pictures and drawings would be helpful for the majority of the students to activate their prior knowledge or to attract their attention toward the forthcoming reading content.

b. Increasing text exploitability

Islamic literature needs to be well-exploited by considering the intertextuality of the text. Intertextuality was the key that bridged a text, although it was written by a non-Muslim writer, with the principles and teachings of Islam. In one hand, it was unavoidable for students to read what had been considered as Islamic literature without connecting its messages with their prior knowledge of Islam. The English lecturers at Islam-affiliated universities, on the other hand, would incorporate Islamic values, through any scheme possible, into their teaching activities due to the types of university they were teaching.

While both students and lecturers were working on the Islamic literature, Islam-affiliated university library provided other texts that could be connected to a given Islamic literature being read. The library facilitated exploration toward two main sources of the messages resonated by the Islamic literature: Qur'an and the prophetic tradition. As such, the exploitability of an Islamic literature remained high as other supporting texts were available.

This study revealed that text exploitability and intertextuality factors enhanced students' interests toward Islamic literature; made Islamic literature relevant to the students' needs; and increased the usefulness of the Islamic literature itself. Figure 3. depicts the exploitability of the Islamic literature.

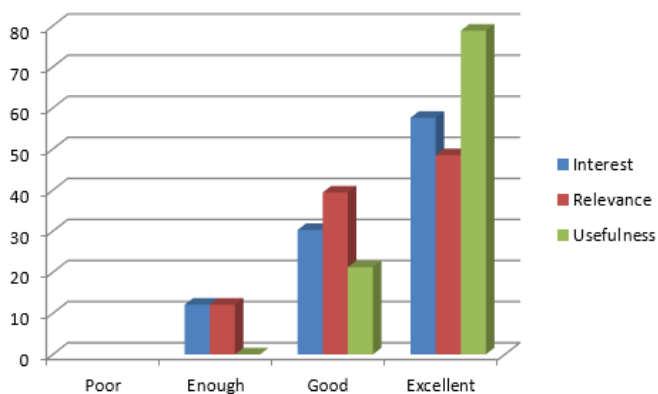


Figure 3. *Students' Assessment toward Text Exploitability*

It is safe to state that to make the students think that Islamic literature is useful, relevant, and interesting, it should be supported by other texts that students could think, recall, imagine, and associate when they are reading a piece of Islamic literary work.

c. **Designing relevant glosses**

The word 'gloss' could generally mean making an explanation acceptable and attractive. Technically, the term 'glosses' referred to an explanation or translation of difficult words, phrases, or expressions within a given reading text (Maley, 2008). For the purpose of this research, glosses were used to make a linkage between the Islamic literature and verse of the Holy Qur'an, the prophetic tradition, and the saying of companion (*sahabah*), which were set out in at the end of the text.

Table 2.

Islamic Literature and Glosses

Islamic Literature	Glosses
<i>Abou Ben Adhem</i> (http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/abou-ben-adhem/)	The Prophetic tradition Jabir reported: the Prophet Muhammad SAW, said, “The believer is friendly and befriended, for there is no goodness in one who is neither friendly, nor befriended. The best of people are those who are most beneficial to people.”
<i>Moses and Al-Khadir</i> (Katheer, 2001: 30)	The saying of companion (sahabah) “I am a slave to anyone who ever taught me even a single word” (Ali bin Abi Thalib)
<i>The Golden Touch</i> (Kasser & Silverman, 1986: 55-56)	Verse of the Holy Qur’an “Competition in [worldly] increase diverts you. Until you visit the graveyards. Then no! You are going to know.” (Qur’an 102: 1-3)
<i>Grown Up</i> (Toh, 2000: 14-19)	Verse of the Holy Qur’an “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.” (Qur’an 49: 13)

Glosses were helpful for students with limited prior knowledge of Qur’an, *hadits*, and the saying of the righteous predecessors (*qawl al-salaf al-salih*). It is worth noting that the glosses might be explicitly or implicitly connected to the content of a given Islamic literature. The explicit connection enriched the students’ knowledge about the principles and teaching of Islam, while the implicit connection strengthened their intertextual skills.

D. Discussion

The first problem formulation of this writing is related to the nature of Islamic literature which for some remains debatable. The finding suggests that Islamic literature refers to any literary texts which are in tune with the principles and teachings of Islam. It should cover some particular terms that

have been proposed by other scholars such as *al-adab al-islami* (Kubarek, 2016), *kesusastraan Islam Nusantara* (Muthari, 2016), *literatur keislaman* (Hasan, 2018), *kesusasteraan Islam* (Hamid, 1990), prophetic literature, transcendental literature, sufism literature, *suluk* literature, and remembrance literature (*sastra zikir*). That Islamic literature also included those written by non-Muslims has resonated an adage within Islamic tradition itself which calls upon taking a lesson even from a non-Muslim (*khudz al hikmah walau min lisani al kafir*). Another finding of the first problem formulation has shown that Islamic literature should center upon and should be used to disseminate the divine messages. This finding supports the notion stating that Islam religion does not admit the idea of *art for art* for a true believer should always remember what Allah SWT said in Qur'an (6: 162) , "Say, "My prayer and my worship, and my life and my death, are devoted to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds." (Shihab, 2016) . Thus, the ultimate goal of using Islamic literature, in teaching English particularly and in education generally, is to enhance one's devotion to Allah SWT.

The second problem formulation is pertinent to instructional strategies of utilizing Islamic literature to teach English. The findings confirm that prompting visuals, high text exploitability, and relevant glosses are effective strategies. These strategies might provide an answer for the previous study related to the unpopularity of the Islamic literature in the English departments in the Islamic countries (Arequi, 2016). When an Islamic literature is equipped with stimulating illustrations, accessible intertextuality, and attractive glosses, it would serve as an effective instrument to teach English and to nurture Islamic values.

E. Conclusion

Islamic literature is self-evident as it is supported by a solid theological ground and social ground. It is not restricted to literary texts written by Muslims as it also includes those written by non-Muslims. Practical instructional strategies have strengthened the position of the Islamic literature within the language classrooms. As most Islamic literary texts are currently

written in English, ELT should be an effective way to accentuate the Islamic literature in the contemporary Indonesia.

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