








Addressing English Grammar Learning Challenges Among Malaysian Islamic Studies Students

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ABSTRACT

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KEYWORDS:

English grammar
English language
Islamic studies
Language attitude
Language motivation

CITATION:

Rasyiqah Batrisya Md Zolkapli et al. (2025). Addressing English Grammar Learning Challenges Among Malaysian Islamic Studies Students. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 10(1), e003199. <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v10i1.3199>

Previous studies have reported that students with Islamic studies backgrounds in Malaysia often exhibit low performance in the English language, which is associated with negative attitudes and low motivation to learn the language. Many of these students question the need to learn the language, making it essential to investigate whether this issue persists in the current era. Therefore, the present study aims to study the problems that these students face in learning English grammar and how it influences their language learning at the tertiary level. A questionnaire was specifically designed and distributed to 61 students from the Faculty of Islamic Studies of a public university in Malaysia before transferring the data into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. The results from the questionnaire reveal that even at the tertiary level, students still struggle with learning English. They felt that learning English was difficult as they could not find similarities between English and any other languages they knew. Moreover, their negative perception of the language hindered them from putting effort into improving their proficiency. Hence, it is recommended for a specific module to be designed for this

group that can cater to their needs towards learning English grammar efficiently, with the hope that it will also positively change their perception of the language.

Contribution/Originality: This study provides updated insights into the struggles of Islamic studies students in Malaysia in learning English grammar, emphasising their unique challenges and perceptions. It recommends the design of tailored grammar modules to address their needs, aiming to enhance their proficiency and positively shift their attitudes toward the language.

1. Introduction

Students from Islamic studies backgrounds are often associated with low performance in the English language. Despite years of exposure to the formal study of the English language, [Ahmad et al. \(2014\)](#) reported that most of those taking Islamic studies courses at Malaysia tertiary institutions obtained only Band 1 and Band 2 in their Malaysian University English Test (i.e., MUET, which consists of listening, speaking, reading, and writing tests used for university admission in Malaysia). Another recent study by [Soh and Sharif \(2021\)](#) reported that most students taking Islamic studies courses at a public university in Malaysia are moderate users of English (i.e., Band 1-3) and that only a few of them managed to get Band 4 and higher. Studies have also reported difficulties among students in learning the language, as they could not even utter simple sentences and had stopped focusing on the subject for a prolonged duration ([Ahmad et al., 2014](#); [Soh & Sharif, 2021](#)). This is an alarming issue as their inability to read and listen to materials in English would affect their access to information on Islamic subjects that are widely available in English.

One of the reasons behind the decline in their performance is due to limited exposure to the language, either within or outside the four walls of the classroom ([Md Zolkapli & Salehuddin, 2019](#)). This is because English does not play a significant role in Malaysian Islamic schools as compared to Malay or Arabic. For example, in Secondary Religious Schools (*Sekolah Menengah Agama*, henceforth, SMA) and Islamic Schools (*Maahad*), Arabic is used as the medium of instruction in 11 Islamic subjects and Malay in several core subjects. In contrast, Secondary Religious National Schools (*Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama*, henceforth, SMKA), Secondary National Schools (*Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan*, henceforth, SMK) and Boarding Schools (*Sekolah Berasrama Penuh*, henceforth, SBP) use Malay ([Mat Teh et al., 2009](#)). English, on the other hand, is only taught as a subject. In fact, all English language components are compiled into one subject, forcing these students to learn grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and many more within a limited time ([Gill, 2013](#)).

Therefore, in order to study the problems that these Islamic studies students face in learning English grammar, three research questions were formulated:

- i. How does their performance in the English language differ from their performance in the Arabic language?
- ii. What problems do Islamic studies students in Malaysia face in learning English grammar?
- iii. Which grammatical components of English do Islamic studies students in Malaysia find challenging?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Students' Attitude, Perception and Motivation towards Learning English

Among the underlying reasons that have been frequently linked to the poor performance of Islamic studies students are students' negative attitude and lower motivation towards learning English (Mat Teh et al., 2009; Ahmad et al., 2014; Soh & Sharif, 2021). Masgoret and Gardner (2003) and Hassannudin and Mohd Kenali (2021) suggest that integrativeness and attitudes toward the learning situation are two correlated variables that support an individual's motivation to learn a second language (L2). Therefore, the lack of a positive attitude towards learning can affect students' success in learning and acquiring the target language (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Roshdi & Rahmat, 2023).

Several studies have noted discrepancies between students who enjoy learning the language (Soh & Sharif, 2021) and those that do not (Gill, 2013; Ahmad et al., 2014). This depends on the nature of the classroom environment and the techniques and methods used by the teachers (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Both Harmer (2007) and Zolkapli et al. (2024) stress that it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the activities involved in teaching English match the interests of the students. This is important to ensure students' continuous engagement with the learning process.

However, the limited time allocated by Islamic schools for learning English limits the opportunity for teachers to experiment with various teaching approaches (Gill, 2013). Contradictorily, the same case does not apply to the teaching of the Arabic language in these schools, as the language components of Arabic are taught as separate subjects. For example, *adab nusuh, balagha, insya'* and *Arabic nahw* are taught for a maximum of two hours weekly (Mat Teh et al., 2009; Mohd Nor & Wan Othman, 2011), allowing the teachers and students to experience various teaching and learning materials. This also allow teachers to learn more about their students' strengths and weaknesses in the target language and raise the awareness of students regarding the language components.

Asmah (1992) and Ahmad et al. (2014) opine that the majority of students studying Islamic courses in Malaysia have negative views and perceptions regarding the role and function of the English language; hence, they often question the need for them to learn the language. Moreover, their misconception of the notion of being "nationalistic" and "religious", including the negative ideas imposed on them by non-English teachers, has led to the non-acceptance of the language. As reported in both studies, most students view the language as *Bahasa Penjajah* (the language of the colonialists), and some view it as *Bahasa Kafir* (the language of the non-Muslims). This is similarly reported in a recent study by Soh and Sharif (2021), who claim that a number of students in Malaysia still view English as a colonial language despite English being regarded as a second language in Malaysia.

These negative perceptions have influenced students to question the relevance of learning English, especially in Islamic studies. In addition, as the teaching approach and the teaching materials of the English syllabus used in the current national curriculum incorporate Western values and Americano-Eurocentric perspectives, students tend to view it as not being aligned to their field in the Islamic stream (Ratnawati, 2005; Wijayanto, 2020; Soh & Sharif, 2021). This suggests that the lack of awareness of the

importance of learning English and the lack of purpose in improving it have affected their performance in acquiring the language.

2.2. Students' Attitude, Perception and Motivation towards Learning Arabic as Compared to English

Ahmad et al. (2014) highlighted that students enrolled in Islamic courses in Malaysia tend to prioritise learning Arabic more than English. These students argue that their need for English is minimal, as they are in the Islamic stream where Arabic is the medium of instruction. Therefore, they feel the need to be more proficient in Arabic, as the language is used in most of their subjects in school and university. This is supported by Mat Teh et al. (2009), as excelling in all 11 subjects requires students to understand the lectures and the content of textbooks that are used during lessons.

Salehuddin et al. (2019) claimed that among the factors that motivate students from the Islamic stream to learn Arabic include the purpose that the language serves in practising the religion of Islam. For instance, Arabic is the language of the Qur'an, and most religious materials are written in Arabic (Ubale et al., 2015; Baharun et al., 2020). Harmer (2007) and Alfian et al. (2021) similarly found that students' motivation is far more likely to remain healthy if they can comprehend the knowledge learned in relation to their daily life practices. Abdul Hadi et al. (2024) found that students felt writing tasks to be challenging when unfamiliar topics were assigned but easier when the topics were related to their personal experiences. They also struggled to write quality academic essays due to limited prior knowledge, which makes it difficult for them to meet their instructors' expectations. Gardner (2001) and Siti Sarah Lotfiah Azarudeen et al. (2024) pointed out that to ensure success in L2 acquisition, students need to have a genuine interest in learning the language, improve, and be able to communicate in that language within the community (i.e., the Muslim community).

In addition, Malay speakers from the Islamic stream are more inclined to improve their Arabic proficiency than English due to the similarities between Arabic and Malay. Although both languages contain only slight similarities in grammatical components, many Arabic words are borrowed into Malay (e.g., *ilmu*, *solat*), which eases the process for Malay speakers to learn the Arabic language (Yusof et al., 2011). On the other hand, the seemingly huge differences between the vocabulary, morphology, and syntax of English and Malay may make it harder for Malay students of Islamic studies to master and acquire the language (Jalaluddin et al., 2008).

Therefore, considering the negative perceptions, attitudes and motivation that past studies have reported, the present study aims to study the problems faced by current English as a Second Language learners from the Islamic studies background in learning English grammar. The findings from this study will provide insights into the influence of their perception of the English language towards learning English grammar at the tertiary level. The insights can later be used to facilitate the learning of English grammar for students from these backgrounds.

3. Research Methods

This research employs a quantitative research design, as it involves collecting data through a questionnaire. The approach is suitable for describing and summarising data in a systematic and objective manner, providing clear insights into the research topic.

3.1. Participants

Sixty-one undergraduate students (i.e., 50 females and 11 males) from the Faculty of Islamic Studies of a public university in Malaysia aged between 20 and 26 participated in this study, which served as the sample size for data collection. Purposive sampling was employed in this study, where participants were selected based on specific characteristics or criteria relevant to the research objectives. This method ensured that the sample aligned with the study's focus and provided data reflective of the target group's attributes. The participants were students who went to Islamic schools or those from the Islamic stream. These students have been exposed to and have been learning the Arabic language for at least six years i.e., during their secondary education, post-secondary education (matriculation, foundation, diploma, Malaysia Higher Religious Certificate [*Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia, STAM*]) and tertiary education. While the total population size was not defined, the results aim to provide descriptive insights within the study's scope.

3.2. Instruments

A questionnaire was designed to identify the problems that Islamic Studies students face in learning English grammar. The questionnaire was formally reviewed and approved by several English experts working in tertiary institutions in Malaysia. The first part requires the students to fill in their background information, i.e., gender, age, the year they were currently enrolled, MUET scores, *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM, or Malaysian Certificate of Education) English and Arabic grades, and the name of their last secondary institution. The grades were necessary to compare their performance in both languages after at least six years of learning the languages.

The second part of the questionnaire includes five questions, each with a different focus which are (1) students' level of difficulties in learning English grammar, (2) the order of the difficulties they face in learning English grammar, Malay, and Arabic, (3) the reasons behind the difficulties they face in learning English grammar, (4) the grammatical components of English that they found challenging, and (5) other components in English (if any) that they found difficult. The questionnaire was prepared in Malay to ensure the students understood the questions.

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was first distributed to 61 students from various programmes at the Faculty of Islamic Studies. They were asked to answer all sections and return the questionnaire upon completion. The score for each question was determined, and the data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28 software. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the tendencies found in the data. The data were then reported and presented as tables and bar charts.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic

From those who responded, 47.6% were from SMA, 23.8% from SMKA and 12.7% from *Maahad*. The rest of the students took the Islamic stream from non-Islamic-based schools such as national schools (i.e., SMK) and boarding schools (i.e., SBP). In relation to

the participants' academic achievement, 46.8% of them achieved Band 2 for their MUET; 43.5% obtained Band 3; and the rest obtained either Band 1 or Band 4. The mean of the MUET scores was 2.48. This indicates that the average band achieved is between Band 2 and 3.

4.2. The Relationship between Students' Schools Background and the Pattern of Grades Achieved in SPM English and SPM Arabic

Table 1 shows that the majority of students from SMA, SMKA and *Maahad* scored 'B' and 'B+' in SPM English. Although a few students scored either 'A' or an 'A-', the percentage was too low compared to the entire population of students from Islamic-based schools (i.e., SMA, SMKA and *Maahad*).

Table 1: Students' Grades in SPM English

Grades / Types of High School	D	C	C+	B	B+	A-	A
SMA	6.9%	27.6%	6.9%	31.0%	17.2%	6.9%	3.5%
SMKA		15.4%	7.7%	53.8%	7.7%		15.4%
<i>Maahad</i>	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%	37.5%		12.5%
Others				20.0%	30.0%		50.0%

Table 2 compares students' type of school background and their grades in SPM Arabic. The data indicates that the number of students from SMA, SMKA and *Maahad* who scored 'A+', 'A', and 'A-' are higher for SPM Arabic compared to their scores for SPM English (refer to Table 1). This suggests that students from Islamic-based schools generally perform better in Arabic than in English at the SPM level. The findings further highlight that most students from this faculty excel in Arabic compared to English during their secondary education.

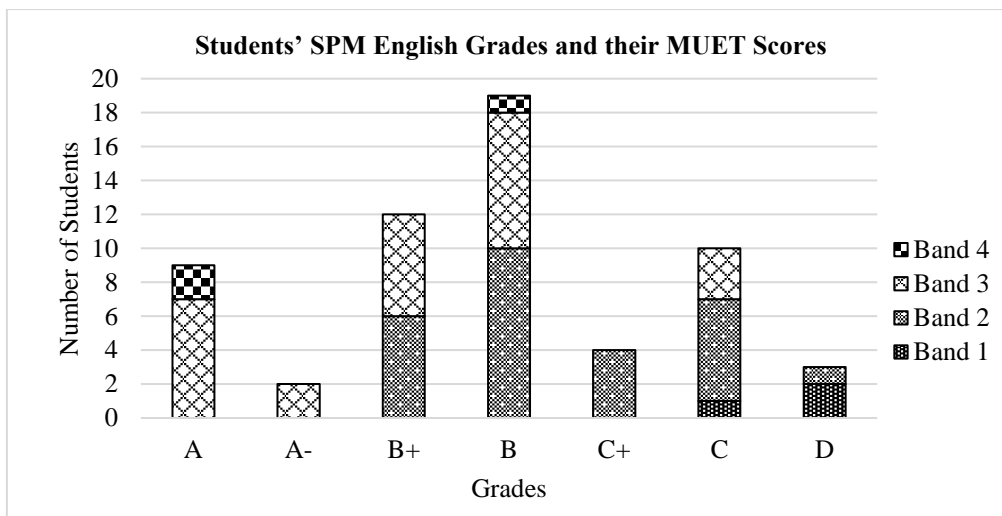
Table 2: Students' Grades in SPM Arabic

Grades / Types of High School	D	C	C+	B	B+	A-	A	A+
SMA	1.7%	13.3%	3.3%	16.7%	20.0%	15.0%	23.3%	10.0%
SMKA	7.7%	23.1%		15.4%	15.4%	23.1%	15.4%	
<i>Maahad</i>				25.0%	37.5%		25.0%	12.5%
Others			22.2%	11.1%	22.2%	11.1%	33.3%	

4.3. The Relationship between Students' Grades in SPM English and their MUET Scores

Figure 1 also shows that 82% of the students who obtained 'A' or 'A-' for their English were those who obtained Band 3 for their MUET. In addition, only 18% obtained Band 4. The bar chart also shows that students' scores for MUET decreased along with their grades in that subject. For instance, a majority of 66.7% who obtained 'D' for English are those who obtained Band 1 for their MUET, followed by 33.3% who obtained Band 2. This shows that the students failed to improve their performance in English even before entering tertiary institutions.

Figure 1: Students' SPM English grades and their MUET scores



4.4. Level of Difficulties in Learning Grammar

Table 3 shows that students ranked English grammar as the hardest language component to learn compared to the grammatical components of Arabic and Malay. On the other hand, students ranked Arabic as 'moderate' regarding its difficulty. These results prove that the majority of the students found learning Arabic grammar less challenging compared to English grammar.

Table 3: The Ranking of Difficulties in Learning English, Malay and Arabic Grammar

	Rank of Difficulties in Learning English Grammar	Rank of Difficulties in Learning Malay Grammar	Rank of Difficulties in Learning Arabic Grammar
Mean	1.4912	2.7193	1.7895
Median	1.0000	3.0000	2.0000

4.5. Reasons for Difficulties Faced When Learning the English Grammar

Based on Table 4, 27.9% of students found learning English grammar difficult because there are too many rules to learn. Next, they could not find similarities between English grammar and the grammatical components of their mother tongue (i.e., Malay) (21%). With regards to the teaching components of English grammar, 16.1% of the students

believed that the teaching techniques used in schools are ineffective, and 9.1% of them felt that the medium of instruction, i.e., English makes it even harder for them to learn the grammatical components of the language. This is followed by the lack of interesting materials teachers use when teaching grammar rules to the students (i.e., 4.2%).

It is also important to highlight that 4.2% of the students feel learning English grammar is difficult because they are not interested in learning and will not use this language in their daily lives. Some of the students (i.e., 2.1%) also reported that the materials used are irrelevant to their field of study; they also felt that it was taught to them without them knowing the need to learn it. A small percentage of them (i.e., 1.4%) also felt that English was too foreign; therefore, they could not see the relation between the English language with any other languages that they knew (i.e., Malay, Arabic). The term 'foreign' in this context is defined as students perceiving the language as irrelevant to them, including viewing the language as the 'language of colonialists' and 'language of the non-Muslims'.

Several additional reasons were categorised into the 'others' category (i.e., 2.1%). These reasons include the perception that the teaching and learning (henceforth, T&L) process in the classroom is too dull, thus making learning grammar more difficult. The reading materials in English are also limited, and some admitted that they read fewer materials in English than in Arabic. A number of them also believed that lack of practice after learning a new grammar rule and the lack of applying recently learned grammar lessons made it even harder for them to master the rules. Another response is that they do not know the proper way to learn English grammar.

Table 4: Reasons for difficulties faced when learning English grammar

Reasons	Percentage
Not hard at all	8.4%
Too many rules to learn	27.9%
No similarities between English grammar with mother tongue	21%
Taught in English	9.1%
Boring material	4.2%
Irrelevant material	2.1%
No purpose	2.1%
Ineffective teaching technique	16.1%
Not interested to learn	4.2%
No relation with other languages	1.4%
English is too foreign	1.4%
Others	2.1%

4.6. English Grammatical Components that Students Found Difficult

Table 5 shows that 28.4% of students had difficulty differentiating between 'this-these' and 'that-those' and were unsure when to use them. 26.6% of the students reported that they did not know when to use 'help', 'helps', 'helped', and 'will help'. 9.2% of the students were still confused about the function of suffix '-s' in verbs (e.g., sits, walks) and nouns (e.g., books, tables). Although only a small percentage of students experienced problems using pronouns (5.5%) and comparative adjectives (6.4%), it is important to report that there are undergraduate students who still could not differentiate between 'he' and 'she' when referring to a male and female subject, and when to use 'him/her'

and 'his/her/hers'. Some could not tell apart the different functions between 'great', 'greater', and 'the greatest' and when to use each iteration.

The grammatical components listed as 'others' include components that students found difficult to master but which were not mentioned in the questionnaire. 12.5% wrote about their lack of vocabulary in English. Some faced problems in constructing grammatical sentences (5.5%). The rest (i.e., 3.2%) identified prepositions and pronunciation as challenging, and a small number wrote idioms (i.e., 0.9%) and English grammar as a whole (i.e., 1.8%).

Table 5: English Grammar that Students Found Difficult

Grammatical components	Percentage
Used of 's'	9.2%
Pronouns	5.5%
Adjective	6.4%
Tenses	26.6%
Demonstrative pronouns	28.4%
Others	23.9%

5. Discussion

The results show that Islamic studies students from Islamic school backgrounds performed well in SPM Arabic, however, their performance in SPM English was relatively low. The findings concurred with [Gill \(2013\)](#) and [Md Zolkapli and Salehuddin \(2019\)](#) where limited exposure to the target language would influence students' language performance. As stated by [Mohd Nor and Wan Othman \(2011\)](#), English is only taught as a subject, while Arabic and Malay are used as mediums of instruction. Hence, students had few opportunities to use and practice the language in academic settings, thus impacting their ability to master it.

Their performance also remained inadequate as they only managed to score between Band 2 to Band 3, which indicate that they did not progress well in their English proficiency before enrolling into higher education institutions. These findings contradict [Ahmad et al.'s \(2014\)](#) findings, where students only achieved between Band 2 and Band 1, but conform with the findings of [Soh and Sharif \(2021\)](#), where a majority of students in this field are considered as moderate users of English based on their MUET performance.

Furthermore, the present study found that many students struggle with learning English grammar compared to Arabic. The main reasons include the perceived complexity of English grammar rules and the difficulty in finding similarities between English grammar and any other language they are familiar with (i.e., Malay and Arabic). The results are consistent with [Jalaluddin et al. \(2008\)](#) where substantial dissimilarities in the language components between Malay and English impede Malay speakers' ability to acquire the English language. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that there exist commonalities in English and Arabic grammar as reported by [Yusof et al. \(2011\)](#), which students in this field could potentially leverage to enhance their English language proficiency.

Moreover, the ineffectiveness of the teaching techniques used by teachers with English as the medium of instruction worsens the process for them to acquire the language since

the language is viewed as too foreign to them. The findings of this study provide additional evidence in support of [Ratnawati \(2005\)](#) and [Wijayanto \(2020\)](#) where the lack of familiarity of the English language towards students may cause them to undervalue the importance of acquiring or mastering it. The term 'foreign' in this context refers to the language being viewed negatively by students to the extent that it is viewed as irrelevant. In fact, some students regard English as a colonial language and as the language of non-Muslims. Consistent with the research of [Asmah \(1992\)](#), [Ahmad et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Soh and Sharif \(2021\)](#), it can be argued that the misinterpretation of the concepts of nationalism and religion prevents the students from recognising the importance of acquiring English language skills, particularly in the realm of Islamic studies.

Other issues that were mentioned pertained to the T&L process in the classroom, such as a lack of interesting materials, limited reading materials in English, and a lack of practice and application after learning new grammar rules. As [Harmer \(2007\)](#) claims, it is the teacher's responsibility to change the students' perceptions towards the language by tailoring their teaching methods to match the interests of their students. In accordance with this claim, [Salehuddin et al. \(2019\)](#) noted that students in the Islamic stream are motivated to learn Arabic due to its significance when practising the religion, learning the Qur'an, and reading religious texts written in Arabic. Therefore, it is recommended to incorporate Islamic elements in learning English grammar. Following the suggestions of [Harmer \(2007\)](#) and [Alfian et al. \(2021\)](#), students' motivation would be more likely to be sustained if they can relate their learning to their daily lives.

6. Conclusion

From the above findings, it can be concluded that Islamic studies students felt that learning English was difficult because they could not find any similarities between English and the languages they already knew. Additionally, their negative attitude and perception towards the language hindered them from improving their proficiency. Given the similarities between English and Arabic grammar as reported in past studies, along with the effort to instil a positive view towards the language through Islamic values, it is hoped that a specific module for learning English through Arabic could be developed specifically for these Islamic studies students to facilitate their learning and mastery of English grammar.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers obtained research ethics approval by the UiTM Research Ethics Committee. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were informed about the study's purpose and procedures. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any time without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by securely storing and de-identifying the data, which was used solely for research purposes.

Acknowledgement

All authors played equal roles in the conceptualisation and design of the study. They are experts in the English language and have reviewed the questionnaire designed to collect the data.

Funding

This study received no funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest regarding this work and affirm that there is no potential conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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