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

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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

Introduction to Islamic education in Malaysia

Within the Malaysian national education system, the Islamic strand of education plays a distinguishing role for the people of this nation. For the rural 'Bumiputera' Malays (literally 'sons of the earth', a socio-political label given to the majority Malay ethnic group and indigenous minority groups), even prior to Malaya's independence from British colonial rule in 1957 to the formation of the Malaysian Federation in 1963 up until now, the Islamic strand of education is viewed as a symbol of shared *Bumiputera* Malay religious identity and a viable option for *Bumiputera* Malay-Muslim parents who want their children to be educated in a thoroughly Islamic manner (Adnan, 2001, 2013b). Accounts of Malaysia's unique Islamic education strand and the founding of so-called 'Islamic schools' on a nationwide scale that incorporate both core academic subjects and Islamic religious subjects within the formal primary and secondary curriculums for the *Bumiputera* Malay majority, have been empirically examined and systematically documented by Malaysian academics (see, for example, Ilias & Adnan, 2014; Mohd-Asraf, 2004, 2005; Rosnani, 1996, 2014).

According to Harper (1999), "in 1953 there were only 26,215 Malays in English schools ... a quarter of the total pupils" (p. 234). Harper's observation failed to recognise that there were other strands of formal education that contributed to the betterment of the largely rural Malay populace in the years before the independence of Malaya in 1957. For example, even though they were limited in number, purely Malay schools or '*sekolah rakyat/sekolah Melayu*' became an important conduit for rural Malays to gain access to formal education. Even if many of these schools faced problems like the shortage of trained teachers and the lack of operating funds, the setting up of these schools, mostly by members of local communities, proved that rural Malays are open to the idea of learning in a formal manner (Melebek & Moain, 2006). Indeed, even if rural Malay parents of that time could not access the English education system which, by and large, was meant for children growing up in town areas, these parents did not want their children to be left behind in terms of education. Another avenue to access education for young Malay children at that time, came in the form of informal Islamic religious schools or traditional '*sekolah pondok*'. Some Western-based researchers assert that such schools were less formally organised and provided less quality education, in contrast to schools funded by the British colonial government. Still, their assertions do not detract from the fact that Islamic schooling provided much needed opportunities for the ethnic Malays to access formal education, a practice that continues in Malaysia to this day (Rosnani, 1996, 2014).

In present day Malaysia, the Advisory Board for the Coordination of Islamic Education (Ahmad Kilani, 2003) together with the Malaysian Ministry of Education regulate the curriculum within, and standardise the administration standards of, three types of schools that are allowed by the government in power to follow the Malaysian National Islamic Education curriculum. The first is called national religious schools (or *sekolah kebangsaan agama*). The majority of these schools are under the direct control of the Malaysian Ministry of Education at federal level. These schools, in turn, can either choose to provide formal education at primary level (*Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan Agama*) or secondary level *(Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama)* or both, and a small number are operated by private companies and non-profit organisations. The second type is called state Islamic schools (or *Sekolah Agama Negeri*). These schools are normally managed by the State Department of Religious Affairs (*Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri*) that are present in different Malaysian states. The third type of school is the 'People's Islamic

Schools' (literally translated as *Sekolah Agama Rakyat*). These schools can be federally managed, state managed or run by private entities or non-government organisations. This final type of Islamic school is more aligned to the concept of '*madrassa*' in Islam. They normally do not provide a full academic curriculum and they mainly focus on purely Islamic education to supplement what students have learned in national schools or national type schools (Ilias & Adnan, 2014).

Most importantly within the Malaysian national education system, *all* schools operating within the borders of this nation are expected to fully subscribe to the national standardised curriculum that is continuously revised and improved upon by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (Adnan, 2012). The main reason for this is to allow all Malaysian students to equally and fairly sit for national standardised examinations such as the Lower Secondary Evaluation (PT3) at Form Three or 15 years of age, the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) at Form Five or 17 years of age and finally the Malaysian High School Certificate (STPM) at Form Six or 18/19 years (Adnan, 2013b; Kassim & Adnan, 2005). But whilst the Malaysian national education system focuses on positive democratic ideologies through standardisation practices and legally-binding federal policies, the picture on the ground is not as perfect when it comes to the teaching and learning of English within some schools that subscribe to the Malaysian National Islamic Education curriculum (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1989). This situation will be further scrutinised in the following subsection.

Teaching English in (privately-run) Islamic schools in Malaysia

The conflicts, the dilemmas and the problems relating to English language teaching and learning in Malaysia are not fresh topics nor will they be easily solvable given the perennial Malaysian 'English language dilemma' (Adnan, 2005; Mohd-Asraf, 2004). The Malaysian government in power (the National Front or *Barisan Nasional*) has instituted several national education reforms to support the teaching and learning of English since Malaysia's independence from British colonial rule in 1957, even to the point of using the mass media and popular media as English teaching tools (for deeper coverage, see Adnan, 2010). Problematically, it seems that teething institutional level conflicts and socioeconomic realities, particularly the widening divide between the urban and rural communities, continue to hinder these positive efforts within Malaysian borders. Lately, to carry on this debate, certain quarters within Malaysia have raised the issue of the oftentimes unexceptional performance in the English language subject in some national Islamic schools, especially those that are operated by private entities and non-government organisations (Ilias & Adnan, 2014).

Whilst there is no doubting that some national religious school students have been able to show commendable performance in the English language subject as a whole, the English language performance of students within *this* particular educational setting (i.e., privately operated Islamic schools) is showing some decline compared to other types of schools within the Malaysian school system. From personal experience, even if some students in these schools managed to score good or excellent results when it comes to English, their real world performance in this subject falters compared to students from other school types. Interestingly, this phenomenon can also be observed in national type schools (where Mandarin language or Tamil language is used), when it comes to Malay language or *bahasa Melayu* the national

language; excellent exam results do not necessarily translate to real world language abilities. With reference to privately operated national religious schools, Ahmad Zabidi (2005) observes that some of these schools have limited teaching resources, computer workspaces, science laboratories and libraries. In addition, some of the teachers in these schools only went through basic teacher training and they are not able to attend continuous professional development courses or further teacher training that might elevate their professional skills. Furthermore, in some of these schools, promotions and permanent service schemes are hard to come by and the opportunities to pursue advanced university-level teacher training are limited. A few such schools are also troubled by poor pastoral and safety records leading to tragic incidents of fire disasters and even the accidental deaths of students in such schools (Astro Awani, 2014; Sufean, 2005; Zaharah, 2005).

It is thus not surprising that the Ministry of Education through its Educational Training and Research Division attributes the mediocre academic performance of students in some privately operated national religious schools (i.e., Islamic schools) to the lack of excellent educators, slow infrastructural development and ineffective school management strategies (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1989). In its 1989 report on basic education in Malaysia, the ministry stated that a percentage of teachers in 49 randomly selected Islamic schools were without advanced educational training and professional teaching qualifications. Some educators in this setting also did not formally graduate from university or college, and a small minority are merely secondary school leavers without extensive teacher training. A cursory analysis of the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) results in 2002 in such schools further revealed that only three out of ten students from privately operated Islamic schools passed all of their academic subjects, compared to six out of ten students from the national school system all over Malaysia. Even more perplexing, just a percentage of students from privately operated Islamic schools scored an 'A' grade in Islamic Religious Studies, a subject in which they were expected to shine (for further discussion, see Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2014).

Within the limits of this present research effort, all in all there seems to be a slow decline in the performance of students in privately operated national Islamic schools in the English language subject at SPM or Malaysian Certificate of Education level (Ilias & Adnan, 2014). This is a cause for concern given the fact that some of these secondary school leavers are expected to continue their studies at tertiary level where English continues to be taught and used. Although it could be argued that Arabic language is more important for these students compared to English (see, Ismail, Albatsya & Azhar, 2015; Mohd-Asraf, 2005), questions arise as to their potentials as tertiary level students and their readiness to study at college or university level when they failed to show their English abilities at a lower (i.e., secondary) level. This is due to the fact that not all of the students from such schools will be able to study in a primarily Arabic language (as medium of instruction) educational environment.

Contextualising this present research effort
This research article reports on a longitudinal project that began several years in the past and continues to this present day. It is part of my long term plan to chronicle the life history (Linde, 1993) and to chart the life journey (Adnan, 2013b) of Malaysian teachers in privately operated national Islamic schools and other school settings in this developing nation, focusing primarily on their lived experiences as teachers of the English language in those settings. Kouritzin (2000)

suggests that life history research provides "possibilities for going beyond the conventional notions of what constitutes useful knowledge, for brushing with the muted subjectivities of those we research, and for revealing the transmutation of unobservable experience" (p. 30). With the assistance of a number of colleagues who have vast experiences teaching in such settings, it is hoped that this longitudinal research project will end after about a decade of collecting the stories of participants and co-constructing narratives (between the participants and myself) to unveil their feelings, experiences and aspirations (Pavlenko, 2007) together with their hopes for the future. This is to help paint the *real* picture of becoming and being English language teachers in Malay-Muslim majority Malaysia. The idea is that this effort would allow me to observe the trajectories that these teachers take and the choices that they make as part of their 'life journey' as English teaching professionals (Adnan, 2014). The life journey of individuals "can lead to different crossroads of identities; … that require real decisions to be made that will have an impact on their lives" (Adnan, 2014, p. 255).

In researching the teaching of English in second language situations, Vásquez (2011) makes a clear distinction between narrative inquiry and narrative analysis. She posits that narrative inquiry privileges "autobiographical *big stories*, or researcher-elicited narratives" whilst the focus of narrative analysis "is on the specific details of *small stories* (i.e., stories told in everyday conversational contexts)" (p. 536). Whilst this research paper does not aim to bring into question the notions of 'big' and 'small' stories, it is suffice to say that the research managed to collect, and continue to collect to this day, both big and small stories of "ephemeral narratives emerging in everyday, mundane contexts" (Watson, 2007, p. 371). This is done with the final aim to observe the identity trajectories that the participants take and the choices they make as part of their professional life journey. Within the limits of this paper, my focus will be on the stories shared by two *Bumiputera* Malay-Muslim English language teachers who work in privately operated national Islamic schools. Whether big or small, the everyday stories (i.e., narratives) told by these participants allowed me to build a huge body of textual data (Barkhuizen, 2010) that was managed and analysed to depict the developing and ever-changing natures of their language identity and professional identity.

Data collection procedures and managing the 'quality' of data

Drawing on 'thick' data (Geertz, 1973) from face-to-face periodic interview sessions (that became infrequent as time passed), written narrative accounts, informal online communication through online social networks and also informal exchanges through mobile networks, this research project deals with the highs and lows as it were, of becoming and being an English language teacher within privately operated national Islamic schools in Malaysia. These research instruments were adopted and adapted to fit with the extended period of data collection with a heavy focus on informal exchanges to make up for the lesser frequency of face-to-face meetings as years passed. Informal exchanges, however, do not detract from the usability of data because the research has come to an understanding with the participants from the outset: communication exchanges with them will be recorded, collated and analysed for the purposes of this longitudinal project. My personal reflections on our exchanges are also shared with the participants on an ongoing basis so that we are able to co-construct the extensive narrative (i.e., qualitative) data record that has been built throughout the last five years. This transparency also helped me to comprehend the most accurate meanings of stories shared by the two participants, due to the fact

that they are able to comment on my comments and to offer amendments to, and alternative interpretations of, my understanding of their stories.

All of the above contributed to managing the 'quality' of my data collection framework and qualitative data analysis. Lincoln and Guba's (2000) construct of 'trustworthiness' was another measure to improve the quality of my thick and extensive textual data record. For Lincoln and Guba (1985), a qualitative inquiry must conform to the notion of trustworthiness to ensure its quality and future value as a product of empirical research. As a complete quality management framework, trustworthiness can be divided into four constructs: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These are comparable to the quantitative notions of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity.

Background information on the two research participants
Having crossed the middle point of this longitudinal project, the shared stories and co-constructed narratives (between the participants and myself) reflected the feelings, experiences and aspirations of my two research participants: one female and one male *Bumiputera* Malay-Muslim English language teachers. This article looks back at the last five years of their professional lives together with their hopes for the future. The female teacher, 'Ikmal' (pseudonym), is 46 years of age and married with four teenage children. She holds a teaching diploma from a local teacher training college and is currently teaching English at a primary level privately-run national Islamic school in northern Peninsular Malaysia. The male teacher, 'Azman' (pseudonym), is currently 41 years old and married with three children. He does not hold a formal teaching qualification but graduated with a business management degree from a local university a few years back. At the time of writing, Azman is also in the midst of submitting his thesis for an educational management master's degree that he funded on his own. He is currently teaching English at a secondary level privately-run national Islamic school also located in northern Peninsular Malaysia. Whilst Ikmal has been teaching at the same school for the last five years, this is Azman's second teaching post after taking some time off work to finish his first degree that he did on a part-time basis (that he also self-funded). Both of these participants are family friends; over the years, this fact certainly helped when it came to eliciting data through the informal channels mentioned in the preceding subsection.

It should also be mentioned that this article focuses on privately-run Islamic schools for two reasons. First, it is easier to liaise with these schools (for short-term field visits, for instance) compared to government-funded national religious schools that have very strict access regulations. Second, it is interesting to investigate these schools given the fact that they continue to be seen as problems to be managed within the Malaysian Islamic Education system, although Malay-Muslim parents continue to send their primary aged children and secondary aged teenagers to such schools around the country. The next section presents the most salient stories from the last five years in the professional lives of Ikmal and Azman, focusing directly on their multiple identity narratives as part of their life journey as English language teachers within the Malaysian Islamic religious school system.

Five years in the professional lives of 'Ikmal' and 'Azman'
Apart from open ended interview questions and a number of narrative short essay tasks to be completed by the participants from time to time, no research or guiding questions constrained

this life history narrative project. This is also to ensure that the focus is firmly put on the participants and whatever stories that *they* wished to share with the researcher. My overarching objective is to collect, analyse and retell stories regarding English language teaching in national Islamic schools, as experienced by the two participants over an extended period of time. That said, it is not possible to retell all the stories that Ikmal and Azman have shared within the spatial limits of this research article. Due to this caveat, only stories or 'life episodes' (Adnan, 2013b) that are very profound and meaningful to the two participants, in the last five years of their professional lives, are retold in this section.

Whilst there are several equally engaging ways to present the textual data record that was built throughout the last five years, this section will focus on three prominent life episodes to make sense of the professional lives of both Ikmal and Azman (one for the former and two for the latter). The emphasis is on periods and happenings that led to profound changes, construction and reconstruction of their language and professional identities as perceived by both Ikmal and Azman, and confirmed by critical analysis of the qualitative data record (i.e., stories) that we co-constructed.

Ikmal's 'School Idol' event in 2011

This subsection begins with Ikmal's profound life episode as an English teacher in '*Seri* Islamic Primary School' (pseudonym). Having completed her teaching diploma from a local teacher training college some years back, Ikmal spent a few years taking care of her parents as the eldest child in the family. After her mother passed on, followed by her father about a year later, she decided to reignite her passion for teaching and landed a job at *Seri* Islamic Primary School. Being "a bit religious but also very idealistic as a human being" (Ikmal, 2011, periodic interview session), she shared her personal teaching philosophy:

> For me, teachers shouldn't just teach grammar, vocabulary, tenses or whatever. For me, I must make my students fall in love with English. You know? They must eat, drink, dream English [laughs]. But seriously, even more so because my students are a bit weak. In this school, the students don't focus too much on English so I need to force them to open their minds. (Ikmal, 2011, periodic interview session)

As part of her personal mission "to open [young] minds", Ikmal became the project manager to select *Seri* Islamic Primary School teacher and student 'Idols'. In truth, it was just her way to rebrand what the school had been doing for years – to choose the most popular teachers, the best students and to give out other kinds of 'fun awards' as a way to motivate both the teachers and students in that school. Furthermore, in recent years, the Malaysian Idol music competition garnered a strong following by younger Malaysians. Ikmal believed that her own '*Seri* Idol' competition would gain the same strong following for years to come. Little did Ikmal know that her rebranding exercise would be construed in a "seriously perverted and idiotic way" (Ikmal, 2012, informal exchange through mobile network). Once the prize giving ceremony was completed and all the *Seri* Islamic Primary School 'Idols' for 2011 were chosen, as norm in Malaysian working organisations, a so-called post-mortem meeting was conducted by the Headmistress of that school and also to formally end the year. Ikmal was really excited because 2012 was around the corner and she hoped that she would be in charge of more such projects in

the future. In addition, the event was a rousing success with students in the school, adding to Ikmal's sense of personal achievement as an English language teacher. In her own words:

> But, you know what happened? It was like the Muslim extremists took time to read the English dictionary to fire me for using the word 'idol' for my event. It's like I was asking the kids to worship false idols. They said idol worship was only during the Pharaoh's time, during [prophet] Musa's time. They said many nasty things. And, you know what? They're just the normal teachers, not the *Agama Islam* [Islamic Studies] teachers. (Ikmal, 2012, periodic interview session)

What made Ikmal even more upset was the lack of support from her peers in the language department. At that time, there were six language teachers in that school, including herself. She re-lived her experience in the meeting room, "the Malay teacher, the Arabic and even the other English teacher – they just kept quiet and looked down. Nobody fought for me. I'll remember their faces 'til I die, I won't forget what happened" (Ikmal, 2012, periodic interview session). As a result of her very negative experience, Ikmal turned down future offers to lead such events, even though *Seri* Islamic Primary School Idol received positive feedback from many students and their parents. About a year after that fateful day, when asked to reflect back on her experience, Ikmal had this to say:

> The most I do now is just help with any programmes that the others want to do. It's easier because it's less heart breaking [laughs]. And, I feel a few people here [other teachers] are typical Malays who just complain and criticise, especially when talking about English. The Islamic [education] teachers and the management are okay. Only those who think they're so religious seem to have problem with me. Oh well, I'm still smiling and also life goes on, right? (Ikmal, 2013, periodic interview session)

Ikmal believes that the English language is neither a problem nor a threat to most teachers in her school. In fact, she is proud of the fact that her own students are beginning to learn English more actively and they seem to enjoy doing English language learning activities inside and outside of her classroom. "The real threat", according to Ikmal, "is the few extremist Taliban teachers who like to talk a lot and they also control the minds of my colleagues. My colleagues do not want to react to them because these extremists are just too controlling" (Ikmal, 2012, written narrative account). Owing to these reasons, it became difficult for her to promote English at school-wide level without having to face the minority extremist teachers group. She thinks that they do not hate English per se but they are unable "to separate English from whatever crazy sinful things their dim-witted minds think English speakers do" (Ikmal, 2012, written narrative account). The fact that these extremist teachers are teaching in an Islamic school further exacerbates matters and makes it doubly difficult for an English teacher like Ikmal to dispense her duties outside of the confines of her own English language classroom.

Azman's appointment as Head of Department in 2013
Both Ikmal and Azman teach in large schools with a sizeable number of students. This reality, however, comes with a number of managerial challenges. As an English teacher in 'Ummah Islamic Secondary School' (pseudonym), Azman incidentally is the only male teacher in a language department with nine teachers, including himself. "Maybe they think I'm a man so

they asked me to become the Head to lead others. So, I just accepted it because I thought well, maybe I can do some good things for this school" (Azman, 2013, periodic interview session), he recounted his experience. As the leader of the language team, he initiated a number of language enrichment programmes especially for English. According to Azman:

> Actually, we must focus much more on English because our students are already focusing on Arabic and Malay [in daily contexts]. Malay is our mother tongue. As for Arabic, it's the medium for teaching the Islamic stream subjects. Sadly, English is always a problem for some of the very weak students. … It's like fighting a losing battle. We teachers know they'll still fail in their English subject, no matter how hard we pushed them. (Azman, 2013, periodic interview session)

So, even though he was chosen as the leader for the language team, Azman became frustrated when it comes to promoting the learning of English in *Ummah* Islamic Secondary School. For him, the public and members of the government in power are being unfair when they continue to blame English language teachers in Malaysia for the slow decline in proficiency levels. "The problem", Azman wrote, "is that these people do not want to look at the bigger picture but they just blame us teachers. They are blind! They cannot see the truth regarding this eternal annoyance [with reference to English language education]" (Azman, 2013, written narrative account). When asked to offer his view on what is really happening in Malaysian secondary classrooms, Azman wrote a sharp commentary in early 2014:

> I also think some Malay students have an 'attitude problem'. Not just in my school but other teachers are saying the same thing. Of course in my school it is worse because students prefer to put more effort on Arabic than English. … A few very weak students do not care at all when it comes to English. They even said they do not care if they failed English. For them, *bahasa Melayu* [Malay language] and Arabic are more important. This is the honest truth. (Azman, 2014, written narrative account)

Even though Azman added that this "attitude problem" is more evident in weaker students compared to diligent ones, his observations are worth mentioning because they challenge the Malaysian society's view that English language teachers from Islamic schools do not care about the language. He also finds it unfair that some parents think that English teachers in Islamic schools are poorly trained and thus unable to deliver English lessons in a productive and meaningful manner. At *Ummah* Islamic Secondary School, all of the teachers in the school support the learning of English or, at the very least, they do not openly reject and criticise anything and everything that relates to that international language (as what Ikmal must endure in *Seri* Islamic Primary School). Azman puts it this way:

> Maybe the weaker students who say they hate English it's really because they can't score in this subject? Also, maybe they find it hard to focus on three languages because their focus is more on Malay and Arabic. … Whatever the reason, I won't give up. God willing, me and the others we'll work harder to achieve zero failure in English. That's the real spirit of an English educator, right? (Azman, 2013, periodic interview session)

Azman's career choice 'crisis' in 2014

Like Ikmal, Azman also believes that he has answered his true calling to be an English Language Teaching (ELT) professional. Though he trained to become a businessperson and manager, Azman feels that his life became more meaningful when he is able to instil in his students a love for English. Sadly, his passion for the teaching profession was not shared by most of his friends and even his own siblings. Looking back to late 2014, Azman remembered feeling like he was "the baa baa black sheep" (2015, informal exchange through online platform) during a reunion weekend with his classmates. Azman spent his secondary years in an elite Malaysian boarding school located in central Peninsular Malaysia. In his own words:

> Of course I can't compare to my classmates in terms of status, money or power. For heaven's sake, I chose to become a teacher-*lah*! They are engineers, doctors, accountants, whatever. … But, I feel down when they joked about teaching. They also joked about the Islamic school thing. They said why teach English when I can be an *Ustaz* [Islamic instructor] and go to heaven when I die? What they said really hurt my feelings. (Azman, 2015, periodic interview session)

To add to his frustration with his career choice to teach English in an Islamic school, Azman also faced the same kind of jokes and putdowns whenever he met his four siblings; all of them are professionals with high salary and status. When asked to share his deepest emotions with regards to his career choice, he admitted that sometimes he just wanted to shut people up. But, once in a while, he will start to question himself whether he had made the right choices to face the future and his "upcoming old age period just waiting in a few years" (Azman, 2015, periodic interview session). For him, choosing to teach English in an Islamic school was a conscious choice he made as a way to challenge and change himself. According to Azman:

> People ask me why [teach] English? I said, "Why not?" I've always loved English. I love reading Enid Blyton, I love English words and I think English broadens our mind because the language is international. And, I really wanted a challenge. What is more challenging than teaching this old language in an Islamic school? Also, when everyone around you is religious, well maybe you'll become a bit religious too [laughs]. (Azman, 2015, periodic interview session)

In addition to wanting to become "a bit religious", Azman also wanted exposure to Arabic language because he plans to bring his family to the Middle East where he will teach English there up to his retirement age. He strongly feels, that "languages open our eyes to the real world and we can learn new things that we can teach others. … It's a win-win and win more situation for me. Too bad that people around me just don't get it" (2015, informal exchange through online platform). Hence, even if he continues to face some degree of disrespect from the people around him due to this career decision, he firmly believes that they should not be too quick to judge his choices. For him:

> The more I think about the choices I made, this is actually my life and others are not me. Lately, I feel wonderful and at peace. I think I have made the best decision for myself to become a teacher and to teach English… even if some of my students don't like to learn this language. Well, living is about challenging ourselves to make real changes to the

world. And this thing that I am doing right now, is my small contribution to the world"
(Azman, 2016, written narrative account).

Conclusion

For the last five years, the stories shared by Ikmal and Azman charted the ups and downs of their professional lives and changes in their identities, part of which are presented as thick data (Geertz, 1973) in this article. For Ikmal, even though she teaches in the conservative *Seri* Islamic Primary School with a few 'extremist' teachers who perceived English language teaching and learning as a problem and a threat due to their own misconceptions, she still appreciates her life as an English teacher and the challenges that come with it. Ikmal is easily the most popular teacher in *Seri* Islamic Primary School who goes the extra mile to make English a part of her students' lives. Nevertheless, the loud voices of the small minority extremist teachers (who interestingly are *not* Islamic education teachers or instructors that common sense dictate might oppose all things related to the English language) make it difficult for Ikmal to spread the joys of learning and using English to all students in that school. The situation in *Seri* Islamic Primary School is perhaps a reflection of the distorted beliefs of some members of the Malay-Muslim majority group that view the teaching and learning of English as a threat to the Malay language or *bahasa Melayu*, as the national language of Malaysia (for deeper understanding of the Malaysian majority language context, see Adnan 2005; Mohd-Asraf, 2004, 2005).

In the case of Azman, even if he sometimes feels that he had made the wrong career choice, he also feels blessed to be working in the forward-looking *Ummah* Islamic Secondary School with other teachers who are supportive and ever-willing to help to promote the learning of English on a bigger scale. The difficulties that he had faced throughout the last five years of his professional life only served to confirm his strong belief in "the real spirit of [becoming and being] an English educator" (Azman, 2013, periodic interview session). Ilias and Adnan (2014) noted such strong positive beliefs in other English language teachers who work in the same educational context (i.e., privately-run Malaysian Islamic school). This suggests that it is not quite fair to put the blame squarely on the shoulders of English teachers in Islamic schools regarding the declining standards of English attainment in such schools. Organisational factors cited by Ikmal and the challenges of learning Malay, English and Arabic at the same time as Azman observed in his students, must be taken into account to understand what is really happening in national Islamic schools.

As aforementioned, the most difficult challenge that Azman must face every single school day is to ensure that all students in *Ummah* Islamic Secondary School finish their secondary education with, at the very least, an average command of English and without failing this important academic subject. Again, the negative views that a minority group of students in his school share, regarding the teaching and learning of English, is possibly a replication of the distorted beliefs of some quarters of the Malay-Muslim majority group in Malaysia (see, Adnan, 2013a; Ismail, Albatsya & Azhar, 2015). Though small in number, the domineering voices of the 'Ultra Malays' (Adnan, 2013b) make it seem as if *all* Malays are against the teaching and learning of English when this applies only to a small minority. The problem is made worse when some of Azman's students choose to focus their attention on the Arabic and Malay languages that seem more useful to them not just in school but also when they proceed to tertiary education. Yet, as explained in the beginning of this research, not all students who complete their secondary

education in Islamic schools will be able to continue in the same stream at tertiary level due to stiff competition and the government's focus on offering more and more science and technology-based diplomas and degrees where English proficiency is paramount.

In truth, the stories shared by both Ikmal and Azman might not be that peculiar within the Malaysian education system. The day-to-day challenges that both of them continue to face, are faced not just by Azman and Ikmal but also a number of teachers who teach English, especially to the *Bumiputera* Malay-Muslim majority group with Malay language as their mother tongue. This is not to propose that a decline in English language proficiency is a uniquely *Bumiputera* Malay-Muslim problem but to illustrate that the Malaysian 'English language dilemma' will continue to be debated for years to come. Most importantly, this empirical study is a direct challenge on the predominant negative beliefs regarding (privately-run) Islamic schools within the Malaysian education system. Surely, *Seri* Islamic Primary School and *Ummah* Islamic Secondary School are not merely problem schools to be managed within the Malaysian Islamic Education system. For instance, from the many stories shared by both Ikmal and Azman, there is a need to acknowledge that there are stumbling blocks to the teaching and learning of English in such schools. At the same time, the dedication and dynamism shown by these two English language teachers, and indeed other English teachers in their Islamic schools, bring hope to once and for all resolve the perennial English language dilemma that continues to be the bane of the Malaysian education system.

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