

Article

Suggestions for Making English Course Materials More Relevant to the Needs of Muslim Students

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Abstract

Some course materials used in English-language classes conflict with Islamic values and the cultural practices of Muslim learners. This article proposes alternatives to adapt teaching materials to suit the learner's needs and their cultural backgrounds. It also discusses the importance of maintaining Islamic expressions and vocabulary in English classrooms. Teachers of Muslim learners should augment English education with Islamic principles, yet also be aware of different cultural practices. The author discusses the relevance of learning English to global affairs and the importance of understanding other cultures and ways of thinking, and recommends the development of an Islamic English.

Keywords: English for Muslim Leaners, English Materials Evaluation, Muslim Students' Needs



บทความวิชาการ

ข้อเสนอแนะสำหรับการสร้างวัสดุการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษให้สอดคล้อง กับความต้องการของผู้เรียนมุสลิม

มีษะมุ ละตีแม (ดาตู)

สาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษ คณะศิลปศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์
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บทคัดย่อ

เนื่องจากวัสดุการเรียนการสอนที่ผู้สอนส่วนใหญ่นำมาใช้ในการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษมักมีเนื้อหาภาษา และการนำเสนอบางส่วนที่ขัดกับแบบแผนทางจริยธรรมของผู้เรียนที่นับถือศาสนาอิสลาม บทความขึ้นนี้จึงได้นำเสนอ ทางเลือกหนึ่งแก่ผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษในการปรับเปลี่ยนเนื้อหาทางภาษาและการนำเสนอให้สอดคล้องกับความต้องการและความคาดหวังตลอดจนบริบททางวัฒนธรรมของผู้เรียนที่นับถือศาสนาอิสลาม และให้ความสำคัญกับการใช้ภาษาเชิงวัฒนธรรมอิสลามอันเป็นอัตลักษณ์ของผู้เรียนมุสลิม บทความนี้ยังได้กล่าวถึงความจำเป็นสำหรับมุสลิมในการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษโดยไม่ทิ้งโอกาสในการเรียนรู้วัฒนธรรมและวิธีคิดของชนชาติที่พูดภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อความเข้าใจที่ถูกต้องต่อสถานการณ์โลกและประเทศที่มีความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรม และสนับสนุนการพัฒนาภาษาอังกฤษแนวอิสลาม (Islamic English)

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาอังกฤษสำหรับผู้เรียนที่นับถือศาสนาอิสลาม, การประเมินวัสดุการเรียนการสอน, ความต้องการของผู้เรียนที่นับถือศาสนาอิสลาม



Introduction

Many works have been created to teach students the English language. The majority of English language education books are created in the United States or the United Kingdom. These books are typically written by experienced and qualified authors from well-known institutions.

However it is important to recognize that because these books are usually written by teachers from western nations for western audiences, there are implicit cultural assumptions communicated in the content. Such educational materials may contain the authors' assumptions about morals, culture, and relationships. (Littlejohn & Windeatt, 1989) It can be assumed that an English language book written by western authors for western audiences may communicate western values as well.

This is a challenging issue for Muslim learners of English, who may have significantly different cultural backgrounds and systems of belief. Recently, Muslim educators have focused their attention to this important issue, and much commentary has been discussed in certain quarters of the *Ummah* (see <http://www.tesolislamia.org>)

Designing appropriate texts responding to the needs of Muslim learners is an important yet challenging task. A teacher's skills and knowledge of English, interest, creativity, commitment, and Islamic consciousness all play a key role in developing excellent educational materials for Muslim learners. Additionally, the job is complicated by lack of time and resources.

Many teachers have multiple responsibilities to attend to, and may not have the time necessary to devote to such work.

A more realistic option for teachers of Muslim learners is to adapt already-existing English educational materials for their students and courses. This is still a challenging task for educators, but it can be done successfully.

The aim of this article is to provide educators with strategies and recommendations for making English course materials more relevant and culturally appropriate to students in the Thai Muslim context. It is intended to benefit those educators with limited time or beginner levels of curriculum design.

Principles for materials evaluation

As a first step, teachers should be aware of some basic principles for evaluating educational materials. First, the teaching materials should align with the aims and objectives of the course. Second, the students' needs should always be kept in mind. Third, teachers should be aware of specific needs and uses that students will have outside of the classroom. Fourth, teachers should be aware of the relationship between the learning process and the learner—especially the learner's cultural beliefs. (Cunningsworth, 1994)

Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of the course should be clearly defined from the beginning. Unfortunately there are times when students are not informed why they are studying English as a Second Language, what the specific goal of a course is, and what the expected outcomes are. This is especially problematic when the course materials were written for a



predetermined curriculum that may not align with the students' needs. This is a common challenge in many Thai institutions, even at the university level. Thus, clarifying the aims and objectives is an important first step.

The Needs of the Students

The teacher must identify the students' strengths and weaknesses in language learning. Again, this can be a problem with materials that have been developed for a different audience or context. The teacher must be able to make a clear link between the content of course books and how it will help the learner. This requires proper evaluation of both teaching materials, and students. Learners may find some aspects of English-language learning to be easy, and others to be very difficult. It is the teacher's job to identify both and make sure that the choice in teaching materials reflects those abilities and needs. Be aware that identifying student needs can be difficult in the Thai educational context. Often times, Thai students do not like to admit they are having problems understanding a particular concept, particularly in front of other students. The teacher should be prepared to find ways to assess the strengths and weaknesses of students in ways that accord with this context.

Language for Real World Purposes

The teacher must be aware that content taught in the classroom will be forgotten if it is not practiced outside the classroom. A teacher can spend many hours preparing coursework for a class, but if the material learned is forgotten by the students because it is not practiced outside of the classroom, then that content and the time

spent preparing it is wasted. Thus, the content selected for classroom teaching should be basic patterns of language that can be replicated in real life. Students will be thankful if they learn materials they can use outside the class! The teacher should anticipate what real life situations their students are most likely to encounter, and what sorts of language skills they will need in those situations. This may require awareness and thinking about the students' current and future surroundings and occupations, and what situations the students are likely to encounter in real life.

The Learning Process and the Learner

The teacher should always remember that the learner is at the center of the learning process. Choosing or revising the correct materials should be done with the learner in mind, not with the teacher's personal preferences. Keep in mind that Islamic values and culture are of key importance to the Muslim learner. The chosen curriculum should reflect the values and beliefs of the Muslim student.

Further recommendation

Cunningsworth's principles for evaluating educational materials are useful and basic first steps that all teachers should be aware of. However, here are some further suggestions based on the author's experiences with teaching English to undergraduate Muslim students at Yala Islamic University.

Be Aware of Cultural Information Embedded in Course Materials

Teachers should scrutinize cultural information conveyed in English course books.



Even though the textbooks written in the United States, the United Kingdom, and even India may be attractive and well-organized, there may be content that is objectionable to Islamic beliefs. This content may be embedded in the presentation of language activities, or pictures and drawings depicting western lifestyles,, dress, manners and attitudes. These pictures can have considerable influence on the young Muslim mind.

Utilize Islamic Ethics and Critical Thinking

The teacher should always couple reliance on course books with teachings about Islamic values. For example, if a course book presents a situation that may be alien to or against Islamic beliefs or values, the teacher should acknowledge that such activities are un-Islamic. The teacher should then lead a class discussion so students can talk about how Islamic values differ from western practices, and what the proper Islamic way should be. The teacher may also want to encourage students to seek information from the internet in English about Islamic values and practices as well.

Adoption of Language Habits

Similarly, the teacher should always keep in mind that some particular language habits simply do not apply to the Islamic context. The western author's choice of words will reflect the cultural practices and traditions of western nations. For example, use of phrases like "A First Date" or "Girls Night Out" are derived from cultural situations acceptable in western nations, but they conflict with Islamic values and morality.

While Muslims are strongly encouraged to learn languages, cultures and heritages of the world's diverse nations as creations of God, Muslims also need to correct and adapt language

so it is applicable to the Islamic context. It is important for teachers to know the underlying concepts of some English vocabulary and expressions. Instead of using English expressions, teachers should encourage Muslim students to use everyday Muslim expressions. Examples include using *Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh* for greeting their Muslim friends, *Insha Allah* when they accept something, or *Allhamdullilah, Masha Allah* when they are pleased with something. This will make English language learning more relevant to the students' lives and beliefs.

Use the Students as Resources

Students can serve as excellent resources for classroom activities. Remember that students like to talk about their own interests and activities. The teacher may want to encourage students to use English to discuss Islamic or Thai Muslim culture and activities. A group presentation or play can be informative, educational, and enjoyable for the classroom.

Materials from Islamic Sources

With the advent of the internet, there is a wealth of information about Islam and Islamic practices available in English. Teachers may want to consider using materials produced by Muslim ELT authors, which are becoming increasingly common in some Muslim academic institutions. This is completely satisfactory and such materials are more likely to be appropriate for Islamic values and the Muslim learner.

Soft Power and English as a Second Language: Importance to Education

This discussion of cultural values and teaching English raises important questions about



the wider topic of “soft power” – the ability for a nation to influence world affairs not through military or economic strength, but through cultural influence. Many academics and commentators have discussed soft power and its role in the world today. It is often stated that the United States has great soft power today, through much of its cultural influence in television, movies or music. Although this may be true, the discussion in this article raises important questions for the future. Many people in the United States or west are only familiar with western cultures and moral beliefs. They are ignorant about the cultures and beliefs of other peoples and nations, especially about Islamic cultures and people. This ignorance has become a weakness of the United States, as seen from its foreign policy actions.

As Muslim teachers, it is important that we educate learners about other cultures and ways of thinking in order to have a good understanding of world events. Of course, this does not mean that Muslim students should accept the cultures or beliefs of non-Islamic societies. However, having an understanding of other cultures is key to raising a generation of young people who can both comprehend and influence world affairs. The choices and direction provided in the classroom are important to this global challenge.

Additionally, it should be remembered that although the English language is from England and widely used in the western world, there is great potential for an Islamicized English. We should encourage growth and development of an Islamic English on the global stage.

Conclusion

It is not a new call for English language teachers to develop or adapt suitable materials for

their learners, instead of simply using materials produced by other writers from different cultural backgrounds. Indeed, many conscious educators in other communities and societies who teach foreign languages are increasingly changing their views on learning and teaching methods to meet the needs of their learners. This article provides some basic guidelines for both beginner and veteran teachers of Muslim learners of English.

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