

ISLAMIC MAGAZINE ARTICLES TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' READING SKILL AND BUILD THEIR CHARACTER VALUES

Sirajul Munir¹
Rudi Hartono²

¹Batusangkar State Islamic Institute, ²Semarang State University
sirajulmunir1974@gmail.com¹, thehartonos@gmail.com²

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Abstract

This present study examined the use of Islamic magazine articles as authentic materials in teaching reading comprehension for the students of English Education Department of IAIN Batusangkar, Indonesia. This idea is based on the belief that students can be motivated and challenged to read if the selected materials pertain to their prior knowledge and experiences. In addition to this, using Islamic magazine articles as essential sources of information can positively expose students to real language. This study used qualitative research. This research was conducted to the third semester students. Observation and interview were used to collect data from 58 students who learned reading comprehension in the classroom. The research findings showed that the use of Islamic magazine articles empirically enhanced the students' reading performance and built their character values. Based on these findings it is recommended that lecturers of reading comprehension subject should be able to exploit up-to-date articles to be used as lesson materials in teaching reading comprehension at the English education department in order to avoid boredom in reading texts.

Keywords: Islamic magazine articles, reading skill, character values

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INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that the Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia has promoted English education department for several decades. The vision of this department in the Islamic higher education institutions is "making English department as a producer of professional Islamic educational scholars who have an integrative Islamic horizon in the field of English". This vision is in line with Law No. 20/2003 article 3: "The final goal of national education does not only aim at producing brilliant Indonesian graduates (who are excellent from the academic aspect), but it has to develop students' potential to become a citizen of faith and piety of God the Almighty, a citizen who is noble, healthy, capable, creative, independent, democratic, and responsible."

To guarantee the success of this vision, teaching English could be implemented by integrating Islamic values and English skills. It is worth bearing in mind that in line with the above vision, teaching English cannot be separated from Islamic values. Thus, in terms of teaching reading comprehension, using Islamic magazine articles is considered appropriate and applicable. This is not only to enhance students' reading comprehension, but also to increase their religiosity.

However, selecting appropriate Islamic magazine articles is a major problem for the lecturers of reading comprehension. Although there are some related Islamic magazines, they are not satisfactory. Creating teaching techniques is another problem. Therefore, the use of Islamic magazine articles containing character value, undoubtedly, is a need.

Studies on using and reading magazine articles have been frequently conducted. Nevertheless, very little has been devoted to their use in order to increase students' reading comprehension as well as to build students' Islamic character. Moreover, less has been even written on the subject of how to integrate reading skills and Islamic characters.

It is not an exaggeration to say that reading plays a pivotal role for English learners in this era. Sidek (2011) put his argument that reading is the foundation of writing. Studies on ESL/EFL reading at a university level indicate that many students lack ESL/EFL reading proficiency and are unable to read and understand well materials in English language. The previous study conducted by Day and Bamford (2005) reported that Japan has also many students who lack EFL literacy skills to cope with rigorous academic demand at the university levels. Similarly, Arnbjornsdottir (2007) revealed that Icelandic University students are facing proficiency problems in academic English.

In the Indonesian context, Cahyono and Widiati (2007) indicated that most university students have low interest in EFL Reading. Furthermore, Hamra and Syatriana (2010) stated that most English graduates are not able to read English text with complete comprehension. Moreover, Munir (2013) observed that university students thought reading as an uninteresting activity.

Students' low interest and poor reading comprehension at the university level might be related to many factors. The first is students' prior knowledge of materials in reading text (Cahyono and Widiati, 2007). Another factor which contributes to

better understanding is reading strategy. Grabe and Stoller (2002) clearly stated that reading strategy knowledge could affect students' reading comprehension performance. The other factor that affects students' reading performance is reading materials. Teachers of reading comprehension are not able to provide updated materials to be used in teaching reading comprehension. Munir (2013) observed that the success of teaching reading comprehension depends on English lecturers' ability to provide reading materials.

To anticipate these problems, the lecturers can use Islamic magazine articles as the authentic sources in teaching reading comprehension. The use of Islamic magazine articles can be motivating due to more colorful images, higher quality papers, layout attractiveness, and accessibility. In addition, most students spend more of their useful time to read magazine. The use of magazine articles is not only to enhance students' reading comprehension, but also to increase their character values.

Islamic magazine articles

Farlex (2012) defined magazine as a paperback periodic publication containing pictures, stories, and articles of interest to readers. Magazines are usually published monthly, quarterly, or weekly. It is imperative to say that the development of Islamic magazine publication, either print or non-print, has increased rapidly. Munir (2015) clearly stated that the spread of Islamic magazines could be found both in the Western and Eastern countries such as America, Canada, Britain, Australia, and India. He further stated that one can access various magazines for the purpose of teaching reading comprehension. In order to obtain the Islamic magazines, one can freely access www.isna.net. This website focuses on the issue of Islam in America, Muslim scholars, Healthcare, and Islamic countries. Another excellent magazine is *the Fountain Magazine*. Its website can be found at www.fountainmagazine.com. This website provides critical information on scientific and spiritual thoughts bimonthly. It also discusses health, economy, fiction, culture & society, history, and book review. www.themessage.au.com is another especially engaging magazine to review certain facts in Australia. The beauty of this website is that it discusses various topics such as family, education, *tafseer* and *hadith*. There are also questions and answers about Islam and Amusement page.

Another interesting Islamic magazine is *My Voice: Muslim Youth Voice Magazine*. This magazine can be easily accessed online by visiting www.muslimyouthvoice.ca. As its name implies, this magazine focuses on the issues on Muslim youth. These issues include the Development of Youth, Youth in Action, Comprehending Islam, Sport, and Entertainment. The other magazine is *Al-Jum'ah Magazine*. It can be found at www.aljum'ahmagazine.com. This monthly magazine presents the issues such as Heart Talk, Youthful Horizon, Character, Science, and Book Review.

Using Islamic magazine articles as authentic materials

It is widely accepted that magazine is one of the authentic materials besides newspaper, radio and TV broadcasts, film, movies, song, leaflets and posters.

Magazine articles are useful media in teaching reading comprehension. Theorists and researchers noted that the use of magazine in teaching reading comprehension should consider several factors such as students' background knowledge (Marzano, 2004), students' familiarity with the topics (Asyari, 2008; Al-Shumaimeri, 2006), and topics of interest (Harmer, 2001). Nuttall (1996) suggested three main criteria when choosing texts to be used in the classroom: suitability of the content, exploitability, and readability.

Berardo (2006, p. 61) further elaborated Nuttall's idea. He suggested several considerations when choosing authentic materials in teaching reading in the classroom: *suitability of the content, exploitability, readability, and variety & presentation*. In order to check the *suitability of the content*, one can propose the following questions: (1) Does the text interest the students?; (2) Is it relevant to the students' need?; (3) Does it represent the type of material that the students will use outside the classroom? Meanwhile, to know *exploitability*, one might ask the questions: (1) Can the text be exploited for teaching purposes?; (2) For what purpose should the text be exploited?; (3) What skills/strategies can be developed by exploiting the text? Furthermore, to keep readability, one can propose the questions: (1) Is the text too easy/difficult for students?; Is it structurally too demanding or complex?; (2) How much new vocabulary does it contain?; (3) Is it relevant? Finally, to get *variety & presentation*, one may propose the questions: (1) Does it "look" authentic?; (2) Is it "attractive"?; (3) Does it grab the student's attention?; (4) Does it make him want to read more?

Using authentic materials has both advantages and disadvantages. Day (2003) in Renandya (2003, p. 2) stated that authentic texts are considered interesting, engaging, culturally enlightening, relevant, motivating, and the best preparation for reading authentic texts and understanding authentic speech. However, there are some negative aspects of authentic materials that learners found, such as, they are the most difficult ones (Day in Renandya, 2003), culturally biased as well as having too many structures being mixed (Martinez, 2002), often contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items, and complex language structure (Richard & Rodgers, 2001).

Njeze (2013) observed that most students spend more of their useful time daily consulting newspaper and magazine instead of investing their time in more creative stuff that would benefit them academically. Tafani (2009) noted that magazines are also source of language development in providing pictures to stimulate verbal or written stories. For example, they may be used for introducing colors and clothes, means of transport, short stories, stimulating picture discussions, and for other supplementary materials as well, which cover a topic that may be under discussion in a language class.

Character Values

Character values have been a main concern of the Indonesian government in recent years. Law no. 20, 2003, clearly stipulates that the objective of the Indonesian education is to create devoted, ethical, strong, intelligent, creative, independent, democratic, and responsible human beings.

In response to the Law, Ministry of National Education has strongly urged the implementation of character education at all levels of education. The descriptions of the character education could be presented as follows: (1) religiosity, (2) honesty, (3) tolerance, (4) disciplinary, (5) hard work, (6) creativity, (7) independence, (8) democracy, (9) curiosity, (10) the spirit of nationalism, (11) love for the country, (12) rewarding achievement, (13) friendliness/communicativeness, (14) love of peace, (15) avid reading, (16) environmental awareness, (17) social awareness, (18) and responsibility.

Character Education Partnership as quoted from Taher (2007, p.55) has created "Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education" to serve as guidelines for effective, comprehensive character education: (1) Promotes core ethical values as the basis of good character, (2) Teaches students to understand, care about, and act upon these core ethical values, (3) Encompasses all aspects of the school culture, (4) Foster a caring school community, (5) Offers opportunities for moral action, (6) Supports academic achievement; (7) Develops intrinsic motivation, (8) Includes whole-staff involvement, (9) Requires positive leadership of staff and students, (10) Involves parents and community members, and (11) Assesses results and strives to improve.

Munir (2013) also noted that building the students' character is not only the responsibility of those who teach religion and civic education, but also all lecturers of Islamic Higher Education. Therefore, the lecturers of Reading comprehension can take part in building students' character. Since the result of his empirical study demonstrated that the use of Islamic content-based materials could positively affect students' character building, he recommended that the lecturers of English education department use Islamic materials in teaching reading comprehension.

Procedures of teaching Islamic magazine articles in reading comprehension

The researcher has carefully chosen Islamic magazine articles as teaching materials in reading comprehension for one decade. Topics chosen from the magazine articles were based on learner's familiarity with the content. The topics selected covered in the magazine include: (1) Islamic studies: Islamic history (prophets, Iconic Muslims, historical places), *ramadhan*, *idul fitri*, *idul adha/ qurban*, *lailatul qadar*, *wudhu'* (ritual ablution), *sholat* and good manners (the power of the small and consistent deed, avoiding smoking); (2) Social Studies: neighborhood, family, friendship, environment, geography, social networking, education and politics & civics; (3) Science: health, animal, food (the miracle of honey), and plants. (4) Entertainment: fictions (short stories, poem), hobbies (journey of a lifetime, the motorbike trip), advertisement, tips, jokes and anecdotes, crossword puzzles.

In the following section, the researchers briefly discuss the planning of reading class and teaching procedure.

Planning Reading Class

- (1) Ensure that the selected articles are pertaining with students' background knowledge and experience;

- (2) Ensure to focus on one reading skill at a time, such as scanning, skimming, previewing, predicting, inference, and so on;
- (3) Ensure the articles are supplemented with lively pictures and attractive layout. This is a way to attract students to read; and
- (4) Ensure that the class is an anxiety-free environment. Do fun things together.

Teaching Procedure

- (1) Warming-up Activities
In this stage, the researcher explained the topic to the students. Students in turn expressed what they knew about the topic. This is a way to develop students' background knowledge. He then generated vocabulary development from the text. He also related the activity to reading skills.
- (2) Reading magazine articles
Students read magazine articles. They then did the various tasks. The activities could be in the forms of matching the questions with the answers, completing the chart and table, making summary, and answering the questions. The students also explained the reasons behind the answers.
- (3) Follow-up Activities
Students discussed character value from the reading selections. The researcher let learners express their ideas in different angles based on reading selections. Students voluntarily stated their different opinions. These activities were helpful to enhance students' character value. At the end of this stage, students were assigned to do extensive reading at home to be reported one week later.

METHOD

This study used qualitative research. This research was conducted to the third semester students of English Department of IAIN Batusangkar. In this, research the researcher used observation and interview to collect the data from 58 students who learned reading comprehension in the classroom.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the observation and interview with the students, it is found that:

Most students enjoy reading Islamic magazines in the reading comprehension class.

The students' responses are as follows:

- "This Islamic magazine text is very interesting and I like it."
- "I love to read the articles in this magazine because it is colorful, attractive, and easy to digest."
- "It is a very challenging task to read Islamic magazines on Islamic issues."
- "In the beginning of the classroom, reading Islamic magazines is a common thing to me. After reading and reading I finally love to interact with these magazine texts."
- "Lively picture designs could engage my interest in reading."

This is reasonable, as Marzano (2004) stated that what students already know about the content is one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn new information relative to the content.

Reading Islamic magazine articles motivates students to read

- "The Islamic magazines motivate me to read more and more."
- "Yes, this activity makes me enthusiastic to read."
- "I am motivated to read the articles in this magazine because it is colorful, attractive, and easy to digest."
- "I observed that my friends' motivation increased by using Islamic magazine articles."

This finding is especially true in regards to Guariento and Morley's (2001) idea that extracting real information from a real text in a new/different language can be extremely motivating, therefore increasing students' motivation for learning by exposing them to real language. In parallel with this, Berardo (2006) pointed out that the positive aspect of using authentic materials is that students are highly motivated, giving a sense of achievement when they understand the materials and encourage further reading. Parallel to this, Munir (2013) observed that using authentic materials can increase students' motivation as well as their reading performance.

Reading Islamic magazine articles can enhance students' reading skill

- "Reading Islamic magazine could improve my reading comprehension in the classroom."
- "I feel my reading skill is improved."
- "I strongly believe that Islamic magazines could increase my reading skills."
- "I believe that Islamic magazines could be well-implemented not only in IAIN Batusangkar, but also in other universities. It makes good reading comprehension for English students."
- "Yes, reading selections could positively enhance my reading achievement."
- "I think the visual information you put in the textbook help my understanding better."

This is perhaps due to students' content familiarity on Islamic issues, as the majority of the students know the Islamic issues appropriately. This research finding supports the study by Al-shumaimery (2006). The study explored the relative effects of content familiarity and language ability on low- and high- ability students' comprehension performance. Content familiarity and language ability seem to have significantly affected the participating reader's comprehension performance. Asyari (2008) further added that familiarity with the topics creates an appropriate context for the students to easily learn new linguistic forms in English (new words and grammatical structures).

There is also evidence that the use of visual information can help students' comprehension. A study by Woolley (2010) also found that reading comprehension is enhanced when visual and verbal information is utilized and linked in the working memory.

Reading Islamic magazine articles enrich students' knowledge

- "To be honest, this Islamic reading text makes me come to realize that in fact Islam puts emphasis on the importance of knowledge, the beauty of behavior, and the clear concept on all aspects of human life."
- "The topics discussed in the reading texts are relevant to the vision of IAIN Batusangkar. Additionally, I also gain an advantage to shape my Islamic knowledge."

Reading Islamic magazine articles can build students' character.

- "To be honest, I got many things from several articles in this Islamic magazine, particularly in the area of character building."
- "It gave me a lot of ideas how to integrate Islamic values and Reading Comprehension in the classroom."
- "These Islamic magazine articles gave me a lot of inspiration on integrating character values and reading comprehension."
- "It unconsciously can change my perception, attitude, as well as my behavior."
- "I love to read mostly [articles] about character building in the Islamic magazine."
- "I can take lesson learnt from this reading selection."

This finding confirmed the similar research done by Narvaez (2002) on moral stories. She concluded her research finding that reading moral texts successfully gains more than reading comprehension skills. Reader moral development, or prior moral knowledge, also influences the recall of complex moral texts.

Parallel to this, Yusof, Shamsudin, & Raof (2006) highlighted several things that should be taken into account to incorporate Islamic values in English classes: (1) Teacher can incorporate Islamic values at different stages of the teaching and learning of English. i.e. at the beginning of the class, during class, and at the end of class; (2) Teacher needs to create or design appropriately and Islamically focused teaching material; and (3) Teacher needs to be strong, confident, and ready to receive any criticism from his/her students and colleagues. If it does not work the first time, try and try again.

Reading Islamic magazine could be implemented in all universities

Surprisingly, students felt that they were confident with Islamic magazine articles being implemented not only in Islamic education context but also at all universities. Here are the comments from students:

- "I strongly believe that character values are universal so that these Islamic magazine articles containing good character could be well implemented in all universities."
- "Honestly, this article is appropriate for all students whether Islamic universities or not."

Students' responses are perhaps because the character values the researcher selected from the magazine articles are universal. As a result, every student thought the articles were appropriate to read.

However, the students also commented on some weaknesses of using Islamic magazine articles. These include the length of the text, font size, and the use of poetry. For the detail discussion, the researchers briefly elaborated the findings as follows.

Reading longer passages are boring

The students, in their reflection, explained as follows:

- "I am bored and tired to read longer texts."
- "Longer passages are harder to comprehend."
- "Longer passages are boring, so it needs to be simplified."
- "Reading longer passages are considered boring."
- "I think the length of reading selection in several parts needs to be reconsidered."
- "I hate longer passages in reading comprehension in the classroom."

These responses suggest that such passages should be simplified or even could be replaced with other reading passages. Unfortunately, this finding is not in agreement with Wang's (2011) study. He investigated the impact of length on reading comprehension. The result of the study empirically demonstrated that the length of text did not have any statistically significant effect on students' reading achievement.

Font size affects students' enthusiasm to read

One of the students reported, "I found small font in particular text. I am annoyed." Another student also commented, "I think font size needs to be appropriately designed." Others stated, "With respect to font size, you must reconsider about it."

This finding clearly supports that of Tavakoli and Kheirzadeh (2011) who reported that much research has confirmed the positive effect of font size on reading speed; in other words, the smaller the font, the faster the reader, though there are some contrary findings.

Reading poems in the magazine is not interesting

When the researcher asked what kind of text types they would prefer, they stated they love to read stories. However, they did not like to read poems. Here is also another students' comment: "Reading poems is a big problem for me."

CONCLUSION

This research should conclude that Islamic magazines are authentic materials which benefit as essential sources of information for the students of IAIN Batusangkar. The use of Islamic magazines can be motivating due to its more colorful, made with quality papers, layout attractiveness, and accessible by the students. Using Islamic magazines could enhance students' reading performance as well as building their Islamic character. The research findings recommend that the teacher of Reading Comprehension should be able to exploit up-to-date materials in order to avoid students' boredom to read.

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