



Submission date: 02/01/2020

Accepted date: 01/04/2020

## EMPOWERING MUSLIM ROHINGYA YOUTH REFUGEES: A BASELINE STUDY OF LITERACY

### *Pemberdayaan Belia Pelarian Islam Rohingya: Kajian Asas Tentang Literasi*

Suraini Mohd Ali<sup>a</sup>, Hazleena Baharun<sup>a</sup>, Hazlina Abdullah<sup>a</sup>, Dini Farhana Baharudin<sup>b</sup>, Mohd. Zaliridzal Zakaria<sup>b</sup>, Habibah Ismail<sup>a</sup>, Noor Saazai Mat Saad<sup>a</sup>, Fariza Puteh Behak<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Major Languages, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

<sup>b</sup>Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

Corresponding email: dini@usim.edu.my, suraini@usim.edu.my

### **Abstract**

In adult refugees' context, functional literacy is the biggest barrier for the refugees to socially navigate in the host community. Functional literacy is 'the level of skill in listening, speaking, reading and writing that any individual needs in order to cope with adult life.' Without functional literacy abilities in the language/s of the host country and uncertainties in the journey to resettlement, the refugees tend to become very vulnerable and traumatized. Thus, social navigation for survival becomes an issue not only because they have language barriers but also internal conflicts on the terrains of the imagined (the hopes) and the unexpected (the difficulties) they encounter in the host country. Employing both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools, this study explored the current English language literacy ability of the Rohingya youth refugees and related challenges. Findings revealed that despite the keen interests the participants have in acquiring English language proficiency, the different alphabetical systems pose problems for them. Despite the challenges in language, the participants exhibited strong sense of brotherhood with other fellow refugees and willingness to extend assistance. Religion developed the powerful bond. Based on the empirical data gathered, a Functional Literacy Course was developed to address language issues embedded with Leadership as well as Islamic Psycho-spiritual elements.

Keywords: Rohingya youth refugees, language literacy, Islamic psycho-spiritual, leadership.

### Abstrak

Salah satu cabaran yang sering berlaku tetapi sangat dirasakan ialah keupayaan literasi yang rendah. Dalam konteks pelarian dewasa, literasi kefungsiian adalah penghalang terbesar untuk pelarian bersosial dalam negara baru mereka. Kefungsiian literasi adalah ‘tahap kemahiran dalam mendengar, bertutur, membaca, dan menulis yang mana setiap individu perlu untuk berhadapan dengan kehidupan dewasa’. Tanpa kemahiran literasi kefungsiian dalam bahasa negara tuan rumah dan ketidakpastian dalam penempatan semula, golongan pelarian ini berpotensi untuk terdedah kepada trauma dan isu psikologikal. Oleh yang demikian, navigasi sosial untuk kelangsungan hidup menjadi isu bukan hanya kerana batasan bahasa tetapi juga konflik dalaman dari sudut harapan dan kesulitan yang mereka mungkin hadapi di negara tuan rumah. Kajian ini menggunakan instrumen kualitatif dan kuantitatif bagi meneroka keupayaan literasi Bahasa Inggeris dalam kalangan belia pelarian Rohingya Islam dan cabaran yang mereka hadapi. Dapatan menunjukkan walaupun peserta kajian berminat untuk mencapai kecekapan Bahasa Inggeris, namun perbezaan sistem abjad bahasa asal menimbulkan kesulitan kepada mereka. Selain itu, peserta menunjukkan rasa persaudaraan yang akrab dengan rakan pelarian lain dan kesediaan memberikan bantuan berasaskan kekuatan beragama pada mereka. Satu Kursus Literasi Kefungsiian telah dibangunkan berdasarkan hasil dapatan bagi menangani isu-isu bahasa yang digabungkan dengan elemen-elemen psikospiritual Islam dan kepimpinan.

Kata kunci: belia pelarian Rohigya, literasi bahasa, psikospiritual Islam, kepimpinan.

### INTRODUCTION

When a group of people flee from their country and become refugees, they face many challenges. One of the most common but real challenges is low literacy level. In adult refugees’ context, functional literacy is the biggest barrier for the refugees to socially navigate in the host community. Lawton and Gordon (1996, p.108) define functional literacy as ‘the level of skill in listening, speaking, reading and writing that any individual needs in order to cope with adult life’. In Malaysia, as of end March 2018, there are approximately 155,880 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR (UNHCR, 2018). From this number, 69,880 are Rohingyas, while others are from Myanmar, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Afghan, Somali, Pakistan, and other countries. The number is staggering and without basic literacy skills, they face problems in navigating themselves socially and effectively in their host country, Malaysia.

In the context of Malaysia as the host country for Rohingya refugees, literacy problems they face is very much due to the different alphabetical language they use as compared to the ones used in Malaysia. In Malaysia, both the Malay and English

languages are roman alphabetical languages. The Rohingyas on the other hand, have non-roman alphabetical language background (written mother-tongue language without roman alphabets). This makes acquiring the Malay and English language difficult. As for the Malay language, even though reading and writing are near impossible, these Rohingya refugees can still pick up the language and speak. However, for English, it is almost impossible for them to speak the language, what more to read or write. This hinders gaining employment and even more pressing, delays the resettlement processes.

Apart from that, due to poor functional literacy in the language/s of the host country and uncertainties in the journey to resettlement, the refugees tend to become very vulnerable and traumatized. One possible reason for the anxiety is the traumatic experience they face causing issues in trusting people. As mentioned by Phan, “These are the people who came from war country...So it has been difficult for them; who they feel they can trust and can work with and can talk openly with” (May Phan, Organizer, Laotian Organizing Project [www.hallway.org](http://www.hallway.org)). Thus, social navigation for survival has become an issue not only because they have language barriers but also internal conflicts on the terrains of the imagined (the hopes) and the unexpected (the difficulties) they encounter in the host country.

It is evident that an exiled people are best guided and assisted by others of similar experience and background who have already been through the process of adjustment and integration. This does not come without issues of its own. One main problem is that there are not many community leaders to go around to assist their refugee communities. Those who are available and willing to assist often could not find time and space to reach out to their communities due the growing population of the refugees. Another problem is related to the issue of hierarchical engagement. The community leaders are usually those of a superior hierarchy in terms of education, social skills or financial capacity within their community. Hence, the community leaders have vertical (hierarchical) and not horizontal (peer-like) engagement with the community members which has further created some gaps between them to seek for assistance. Considering that, who else can be of help to assist the community? According to Marshall, et al. (2016), refugee youths possess perspectives and knowledge that have the potential to contribute greatly to building inclusive communities. Thus, with the issue of poor functional literacy in the language/s of the host country, this study was conducted to first identify the current English language literacy level of the Rohingya youth refugees. Following that, a Functional Literacy Course was developed. The course was used to train a group of youth refugees in order to equip them with relevant and sufficient literacy abilities to function socially and effectively in the host country. Equally important, relevant and sufficient

functional literacy abilities would empower them as social navigators to assist their own community.

The main objective of this study was to identify the current English language literacy level of the Rohingya youth refugees. This is to enable the researchers to embark on the actual project with the participants which is the Functional Literacy Course. Only after the language literacy level has been identified can a literacy course be designed to teach and equip the participants with relevant language skills. As all the participants are Muslims and religion plays an important role in their life, the literacy course is also embedded with Islamic psycho-spiritual values.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to assess the current literacy ability of the participants, the study employed both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools.

### ***Participants***

For this study, 15 Rohingya youth participants from Selangor were selected through purposive sampling method. They have resided in Malaysia for a minimum of three years and have secured some form of employment. Most of them do menial jobs which include as kitchen helpers, grass cutters and store helpers. Being employed, the participants do not depend on other fellow refugees to survive as they themselves are independent to a certain extent. Being independent gives them the opportunities to further equip themselves with other skills relevant to ensure their survival in the host country.

### ***Data Collection***

Several data collection tools were used. They included needs analysis document and focus group interviews. For the need analysis document, the participants were given a list of items to be answered. They included writing their names and home addresses, and simple reading aloud activities. This assessment was used to gauge the participants' current language literacy levels.

Following this, one round of focus group interview was carried out. During the focus group interview, the 15 participants were put into groups of 3-4. Each research team member was assigned to conduct a focus group interview. The aim of the focus group interview was to further probe and gain in-depth data from the participants.

### ***Data Analysis***

The needs analysis document was analyzed by looking at the 'can do' abilities of the participants. This included the participants' abilities to write their names and home addresses. Their ability to read was also exhibited through the 'can do' abilities. As

for the interviews, thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcripts of the focus group interviews. Data gathered based on the analyses carried out on both the needs analysis documents and the transcripts of the focus group interviews were used to gauge the participants' ability of functional literacy skills.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the data gather from the need analysis document and the focus-group interviews, several themes were formed. The themes were related to the participants' language abilities, interests in language learning and influence of religion. Specifically, the themes are Zero English Language Proficiency, Different Alphabetical System, Interest in Learning English, Religion – being Muslims. They are further elaborated in the following section.

### ***Zero English Language Proficiency***

The needs analysis document was used to examine the participants' English language literacy abilities. The participants were required to rate their writing, speaking and reading abilities in the English language. Based on the participants' responses, a majority of them rated themselves as 'poor' to 'none at all' for the three language skills assessed. When probed further based on the needs analysis findings, the participants highlighted that they could not read, understand words spoken or written in English as they had little or no exposure to English at all when they were back in their home country. Majority of them had only primary school education. Their schooling years were interrupted due to war and they had to leave their country. As mentioned by Participant 5;

*I went to school but for a very short while, there was war and we had to leave.*

While some had only primary school education, a few had none at all. Poverty was cited as the reason why they did not attend school. This was mentioned by a participant when asked the level of education he possessed. Participant 3 revealed that he did not get to attend school at all due to the economic situation of his family;

*We had no money, so I did not go to school. I only can speak Rohingya language, but I cannot write.*

Without basic education or even with little primary education, it made it challenging for the participants to comprehend the language/s used in the host country, Malaysia, resulting in difficulties in seeking proper employment. Failure to gain proper employment does not help them in their effort to elevate their economic status and their effort to assist other fellow refugees. It becomes even more difficult for these

youth refugees to apply for resettlement in other countries especially English-speaking countries. As a result, they are stuck at where they first started in the host country, they could not provide proper assistance to other fellow refugees and the cycle of poverty might continue.

### ***Different Alphabetical System***

Even those who attended school for a while before they fled their country could not read or write in English despite being able to pick up some basic words. One of the reasons for their inability to read or write, or even attempt to learn in English is due to the different alphabetical system used. In their home country Myanmar, the system used is the Burmese alphabet. It is very different from the system used for English which is the roman alphabetical system. This very stark difference makes it challenging for the participants to learn read or write in English. As mentioned by Participant 7;

*It is difficult, I can't understand the letter, difficult to read or write.*

To learn English requires a lot of efforts from them. Not only that the language is alien to them, the alphabetical system is equally foreign to the participants. Hence, they need to be given relevant input if they were to master English.

### ***Interest in Learning English***

However, despite the language barrier, differences in the alphabetical systems, issue of poverty and other challenges faced by the participants in the host country, the participants reiterated that learning English was paramount for them particularly for employment and resettlement purposes. As mentioned by Participant 8;

*I want to learn English so that I can understand what people say, I can respond to them, I can read road signs and most importantly, I can get better jobs.*

They believe that by being proficient in English, their lives would be a bit easier as they could communicate with those from the host country better. Participant 6 quipped;

*When we know English, we can communicate better, and life would be much easier.*

With better language proficiency especially in English, better employment opportunities would be ensured. Getting better jobs would then guarantee that their

livelihood will improve. Apart from that, proficiency in both Malay and English would enable the participants to assist their fellow refugees better. As mentioned by Participant 1;

*I think if I know English, not only can I get good jobs, I can also help my people. We belong together, same race, same religion and we are poor. Helping them is important.*

With the advantages the participants believe they would gain in understanding and using English, they were very much interested to learn English. As highlighted above, obtaining better employment and assisting fellow refugees were cited as the plus points gained from learning English.

### ***Religion – being Muslims***

All the participants were born Muslims. Islam is the religion they were exposed to and that they continue practising. The participants observe their religious obligations seriously. They perform their prayers, fast during Ramadhan and read the Quran. Their closeness to their religion helped them develop patience during trying times. As mentioned by Participant 1;

*My religion helps me develop patience when I face problems.*

The participants also felt that religion is important as it helped as daily guidance. This was mentioned by Participant 2 who quipped;

*My religion guides me, every day I try to read the Quran and I refer to Allah.*

The participants value religion greatly. To them, religion is important, and it is obvious that religion holds the participants together at many levels. As religion is their source of guidance along their daily journey in life (Ahmed and Amer, 2012), this shows that participants will tend to utilize religion whenever they are faced with challenges whether physically or psychologically (Porter, 2007). The fact that they know where to refer to (religion) shows that they have some level of psycho-spiritual awareness for internal strength.

Not only religion and spirituality helped them internally (Dwairy, 2006), they also see religion as a source of strength to maintain brotherhood especially as they are in present, displaced in another country. As they embrace the same religion, they develop a strong kinship/bond with one another. Although they possessed the inner

strength and bond as well as has the intend to help other fellow refugees, they have not done it. This is either because they thought it was the community leaders’ job or did not know the means to reach out the community. It is this kinship/bond that becomes the reason for wanting to help other fellow refugees. As mentioned by Participant 8;

*We are Muslims and I want to help other refugees  
as they are Muslims too, life is difficult for them.*

With strong religious fundamentals, the participants develop self-identity and build inner spiritual strengths to face the uncertainties in their life as refugees. However, although they possessed the inner strength and bond as well as has the intention to help other fellow refugees, they have not done it. This is either because they thought it was the community leaders’ job or did not know the means to reach out the community.

## **CONCLUSION**

Findings revealed that despite the keen interests the participants have in acquiring English language proficiency, the different alphabetical systems pose problems for them. It is even more challenging when a significant number of them did not get proper schooling before they fled from their country. Despite the challenges in language, the participants exhibited strong sense of brotherhood with other fellow refugees and willingness to extend assistance. Religion developed the powerful bond. Based on the empirical data gathered, a Functional Literacy Course was developed to address language issues embedded with Leadership as well as Islamic Psycho-spiritual elements. The Functional Literacy Course is a fusion of Language Literacy (English Language) and Leadership as well as Islamic Psycho-spiritual modules.

The language literacy module is designed to equip the refugees with basic English language literacy skills. It includes basic English literacy specifically for non-roman alphabetical background refugees. The Leadership component is designed to train the refugees to become leaders in their own community and eventually, act as social navigators. As for the Islamic psycho-spiritual module, it aims to help the refugees cope with stress and losses associated with migration. It also would assist in preparing the refugees to face the unexpected and believe in the faiths destined for them. The combination of language, leadership skills and Islamic psycho-spiritual is considered a package to enable the participants to grasp the social navigation knowledge and skills.



In the context of this study, a person is considered to have good social navigation knowledge and skills when he/she has the ability to communicate (language literacy), to coach/mentor (leadership skills), and possess inner spiritual strengths (Islamic psycho-spiritual). These knowledge and skills are of utmost importance to refugees to thrive for successful resettlement (Porter, 2007). The knowledge and skills are very much needed for them to socialize in the host community, to help each other by mentoring as well to face the uncertainties in their life as refugees.

Through the Functional Literacy Course, which encompasses English language literacy embedded with Islamic psycho-spiritual values, the Rohingya youth refugees is expected to have grasp certain level of functional literacy and practice the concept of social navigation to help their community members. With the knowledge and skills acquired through the course, the participants are anticipated to become the agent of change, to help the community members to socially navigate for successful resettlement.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia under Matching Grant Scheme (Matching Grant No: USIM/MG/MYCARE/FPBU/055012/70818)

### REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. and Amer, M.M. (Eds.). (2012). *Counseling Muslims: Handbook of mental health issues and interventions*. New York: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Dwairy, M. (2006). *Counselling and psychotherapy with Arabs and Muslims: A culturally sensitive approach*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.
- Lawton, D. and Gordon, V. (1996). *Dictionary of education*. London, Hodder and Stoughton.
- Marshall, E. A., Butler, K., Roche, T., Cumming, J., & Taknint, J. T. (2016). Refugee youth: A review of mental health counselling issues and practices. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, 57(4), 308-319. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cap0000068>
- May Phan, Laotian Organizing Project. <https://www.issuelab.org/resources/2970/2970.pdf>
- Porter, M. (2007). Global evidence for a biopsychosocial understanding of refugee adaptation. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 44, 418–39.
- UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), (2018). Global Report, Publisher: UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). <https://www.unhcr.org/en-my/publications/fundraising/5d0a1ce47/unhcr-global-report-2018.html?query=2018%20report>.