

Religious Beliefs and Teacher's Identity: An Autoethnography of A Muslim English Teacher

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Abstract

Teacher's religious identity or personal faith is significantly associated with their professional identity and teaching practice in the classroom. The purpose of this study is to narrate a Muslim English teacher's views on how religious beliefs influence the teacher's identity and practices in teaching English. Employing autoethnography research design, I explored my experience and perspectives since I was an English learner, then a student-teacher, an English teacher at an Islamic school, and a lecturer at a college using personal experience narration. In this article, I acknowledge that my perspectives about my professional identity as an English teacher are shaped locally and globally, influenced by religious beliefs, experiences, education, and formal and informal interaction with colleagues around me. This study gives insight into the influences of a Muslim English teacher's religious beliefs on identity as an English teacher and practices in teaching English.

Keywords: *Religious Beliefs, Teacher's Identity, Muslim English Teacher*

Abstrak

Keyakinan agama yang dimiliki guru secara signifikan terkait dengan identitas profesional dan praktik mengajar mereka di kelas. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menarasikan pandangan guru Bahasa Inggris Muslim tentang bagaimana keyakinan agama memengaruhi identitas dan praktik guru dalam mengajar Bahasa Inggris. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian autoetnografi, penulis mengeksplorasi pengalaman dan perspektif pribadi tentang identitas profesional sebagai pembelajar bahasa Inggris, kemudian menjadi mahasiswa fakultas pendidikan atau calon guru, guru Bahasa Inggris di sekolah Islam, dan dosen Bahasa Inggris di perguruan tinggi umum menggunakan narasi pengalaman pribadi. Dalam artikel ini, saya mengakui bahwa perspektif saya tentang identitas profesional sebagai guru Bahasa Inggris dibentuk secara lokal dan global, dipengaruhi oleh keyakinan agama, pengalaman, dan pendidikan, serta interaksi formal dan informal dengan rekan kerja di sekitar saya. Diharapkan penelitian ini akan memberikan wawasan tentang pengaruh keyakinan agama guru Bahasa Inggris Muslim terhadap identitas sebagai guru bahasa Inggris dan praktik dalam mengajar bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: Keyakinan agama, Identitas Guru, Guru Bahasa Inggris Muslim

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A. Introduction

For some people, religion is the most important part of their life. They put their religion at the top priority over their personal life, family, friends, profession or career, and others. However, religion always teaches the follower to live in balance. Religion never destroys personal life, family, friends, jobs, or other things. Religion protects its followers so that they can live well and happily, including in their profession or career life. I believe that my religious beliefs always support me in many situations and conditions related to my profession as an English teacher.

According to several previous studies, a teacher's religious identity or personal faith is significantly associated with their professional identity and teaching practice in the classroom. It influences the teachers' professional belief on how to act and interact with students (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Tajeddin et al., 2021), how the teachers manage the classroom and support the intellectual and emotional development of students (White, 2014), affects the way the teacher teaches (Irfiana et al., 2021) contributes to the teachers' identity maintenance and shields from threats (Phillips, 2021), is associated with the selection of classroom resources and other curricular decision (Eslamdoost et al., 2020; Hartwick, 2015; Tajeddin et al., 2021), enhance their positive image as teachers and could motivate them to be better teachers (Yumarnamto & Prijambodo, 2020).

Teachers' religious identities positively influence their professional identity and teaching practice in the classroom in many ways. Religious belief contributes to teachers' professional belief in acting lovable, respecting all students, teaching in student-centered ways, and witnessing their religious faith (Baurain, 2012). Teachers with a strong connection to God and viewing teaching as God's calling tend to develop strong bonds with their students. They are more likely to treat students as distinct persons, pay close attention to their needs, and provide emotional support (Hartwick, 2015). Furthermore, these teacher religious faiths significantly impact their conduct and performance, as evidenced by their efforts to manage anger and refrain from actions like mocking or gossiping (Tajeddin et al., 2021).

While religious interpretation of conflicts is believed to be able to protect the teachers' identity from threats in a period of distress, supporting identity maintenance and stabilization processes (Phillips, 2021), religious values could also be the reason for the conflict itself. A study by Eslamdoost, et al. (2020) indicates that EFL teachers confront conflicts across their personal beliefs and external expectations. Adaptations in the state-sponsored textbooks in Iran that prioritize Iranian culture and Islamic values are perceived differently by EFL teachers. Teachers reacted differently to contextual mandates, and professional identity construction was influenced by how they prioritized and positioned their principles in practice. However, this process often involves personal and interpersonal challenges from conflicts between their beliefs, teaching contexts, and local or national regulations.

Several studies also found that religious belief could distract the teachers' professional practice. A study by Qoyyimah, et al (2023) found that English teachers regard their professional identity as more focused as a caregiver and a moral guardian over their identity as an English teacher who teaches English. The government's and teachers' agendas did not match because the teacher participants did not determine student language competence as their goal. Another study by Yumarnamto & Prijambodo (2020) also indicates that religion-based schools' religious perspectives and identities could fall to a strict and narrow perspective. There could be a danger of suppressing different perspectives that may enhance teachers' professional identity development. This perspective may not allow students and teachers to see the

complete picture of the sociocultural contexts of the school. In this way, strong religious beliefs can be a shield against their reluctance to change.

Until today, I have not found any auto-ethnography about this topic. Therefore, this study aims to narrate a Muslim English teacher's views on how religious beliefs influence the teacher's identity and practices in teaching English. This study depicts the journey of a Muslim English teacher starting as an English learner, a student-teacher, a teacher at an Islamic school, and a lecturer at a college.

B. Literature Review

1. Religious Beliefs

One's belief is subjective, experience-based, often implicit knowledge and emotions on some matter (Pehkonen & Laine, 2003). Every teacher has beliefs related to their jobs, students, subject matters, and roles and responsibilities. Gilakjani & Sabouri (2017) stated that teachers' beliefs have a more significant effect than the teacher's knowledge on planning their lessons, the types of decisions they adopt, and classroom practice. Therefore, beliefs are key in teachers' classroom practices and professional development.

The literature on teacher knowledge often explores beliefs related to teaching techniques, methodologies, curriculum design, student motivation, classroom management, professional growth, and similar topics. While political and moral beliefs are occasionally discussed, spiritual and religious beliefs are primarily overlooked (Baurain, 2012). The least discussed beliefs of teachers may stem from their religiosity (Anderson et al., 2015). Teachers' religious beliefs are vital in shaping their personal and professional lives. For many, religion is integral to their daily experiences and a foundational aspect of their long-term identity (White, 2014).

2. Teacher identity

Teacher identity is dynamic and facilitated by many personal and external aspects. Teacher identity, as defined by Kelchtermans in Eslamdoost et al. (2020), is "a personal interpretive framework" or a set of beliefs and representations that teachers develop over time and that serve as a lens through which they perceive, make sense of, and act in their job situation. He also recommended that teachers respond strongly if their professional identity and moral integrity are questioned as part of being a 'good teacher'.

Teacher identity can also be formulated as a multi-faceted phenomenon that grows throughout life and professional experience, constructed by multiple personal and contextual aspects that interact simultaneously. Therefore, teacher identity means dynamic (continuous process), multifaceted, negotiated (negotiation between the self and the work context), and co-constructed (interaction with a social, cultural, and professional environment) (Granjo et al., 2021).

3. The Relationship of Religious Beliefs and Teacher's Identity

Bradley Baurain (2012) investigated how Christian ESOL teachers perceive and incorporate their religious beliefs into their professional practices. These teachers felt their faith compelled them to act with love and charity toward their students, respect each student as inherently valuable, adopt student-centered teaching approaches, and share their Christian faith. The study highlights the interplay between personal and professional beliefs in shaping teacher knowledge. Similarly, a study by Tajeddin et al. (2021) found that religious backgrounds profoundly influenced teachers' behaviors and performances. This influence was evident in their efforts to manage anger, avoid insulting or gossiping, and replace or

disregard materials conflicting with Islamic principles. These findings offer practical insights for teachers, institutional administrators, and other stakeholders, emphasizing the importance of understanding religious teachers' identities to mitigate potential identity-related conflicts.

A study by White (2014) observed how teachers' religious orientations influence their practices in public schools, particularly in classroom management and fostering social interactions among students. The participants included Jewish and Christian teachers with varying degrees of religious commitment. The findings revealed that these teachers relied on their religious beliefs and experiences in four key areas: building a sense of community, using mistakes as learning opportunities, emphasizing the Golden Rule, and implementing specific discipline strategies. By reflecting on the connection between their personal and professional identities, teachers can assess whether their teaching approaches align with their religious values and serve the best interests of student learning.

Supporting several previous studies, the results of a study by Phillips (2021), teachers indicated that the personal faith of teachers provided religiously motivated narrative frameworks that aided in the interpretation of one's experiences. The religious interpretation of conflicts protected the teachers' identity in distress by resonating with essential constituents of identity construction (i.e. meaning, distinctiveness, self-esteem). The preliminary findings of this study recommend that personal faith may improve teacher resilience. A study by Irfiana et al. (2021) also revealed that a teacher's identity is undoubtedly influenced by the teacher's religious beliefs and social values, which affect how the teacher teaches. Due to the teaching experience, there is no identity crisis and difficulties in implementing the identity. The teacher can distinguish his role as a teacher and as an individual. Findings also showed that recognizing teachers' identities allows them to empower, expand, and challenge their experiences and beliefs.

However, a study by Yumarnamto and Prijambodo (2020) showed two sides of the results. On the one hand, a strong Christian identity and teachers' beliefs can enhance their positive image and inspire them to strive for excellence in their teaching. A well-developed religious identity provides teachers with resources to interpret their experiences positively, supporting their professional growth and helping them meet the demands of quality Christian education. Encouraging positive religious perspectives can foster a thriving school environment and should be promoted for all educators. However, a prominent religious identity may also limit teachers' ability to address challenges in their practices, as these beliefs might reinforce resistance to change. Maintaining a strict and narrow religious perspective in Christian schools could suppress alternative viewpoints that contribute to developing teachers' professional identities. This rigidity may prevent teachers and students from fully understanding the broader sociocultural contexts of the school, with strong religious beliefs potentially acting as a barrier to adaptability and growth.

A study by Qoyyimah et al. (2023) found that teachers consider their professional identity to be more focused on the caregiver and moral guardian rather than as an English teacher. It also shows that the teachers' professional identity tells teachers' expectations or desires for their students' futures or student identity as teachers imagined. The government's and teachers' agendas did not match because the teacher participants did not determine student language competence as their goal. Therefore, approaches must be undertaken to help teachers design curriculum and cultural content. That would ensure that the philosophy underpinning

educational policies that represent prospective identity in the national curriculum remains vital.

A study by Eslamdoost et al. (2020) indicated that EFL teachers confront conflicts across their personal beliefs and external expectations. Two teacher sides show opposing positions on the issue of teaching the target culture. One stance criticizes ideological adjustment in state-sponsored English textbooks that prioritize Iranian cultures and Islamic values. Another stance takes an opposing stance that deviates from teaching the target culture in language classrooms due to personal beliefs, which, in other words, supports the inclusion of local culture and Islamic values in English textbooks. The interaction of their ideological perspectives and professional identity construction demonstrates identity's multifaceted and fluid nature. Teachers are not unbiased agents of language teaching and learning environments. These findings emphasize how EFL teachers' identities are subject to conflict, negotiation, and (re)construction as they interact with policies, curricular materials, students, and other teachers.

C. Method

1. Research Design

This study employed an auto-ethnography approach. Auto-ethnography is a research and writing approach that aims to describe and systematically analyze personal experiences to gain insights into cultural phenomena (Adams et al., 2017). Unlike other research methods, auto-ethnography strives to make personal experiences meaningful and cultural experiences engaging. Creating accessible texts has the potential to reach broader and more diverse audiences often overlooked by traditional research, thus fostering personal and social change (Ellis et al., 2011). As a qualitative method, auto-ethnography functions both as a process and a product (Ai, 2016). This study utilizes personal narratives to examine the interplay between religious beliefs and teachers' identities and practices.

2. Participants of the Study

This study tries to get some insight into the influences of a Muslim English teacher's religious beliefs on identity as an English teacher and practices in teaching English. In this article, I explored my experience and perspectives since I was an English learner, then a student-teacher, an English teacher at an Islamic school, and a lecturer at a college. In this article, I acknowledge that my perspectives are shaped locally and globally, influenced by religious beliefs, experiences, education, and formal and informal interaction with colleagues around me.

3. Instruments

In order to mine for my personal experiences, I have drawn on sociological introspection and emotional recall, memory work, self-introspection, interactive introspection, and reading my writing on my blog and social media (Douglas & Carless, 2013).

4. Data Analysis Techniques

Based on the personal experiences data that I gathered, I interpret personal narratives and connect them to broader cultural, social, or theoretical contexts. The analysis process is iterative and reflexive, emphasizing personal insight and external critique. Then, I identify meaningful pieces of data and group related data into broader themes that connect personal experiences to cultural or societal phenomena. I reflect on how my experiences relate to the larger cultural or social

context. Last, I situate my narratives within larger cultural or societal frameworks and construct a cohesive narrative that blends personal stories with analysis.

D. Result

1. Why I Become an English Teacher

I was born in a typical Muslim family in Indonesia. Even though my parents were only primary school graduates, they always supported me in achieving as high an education as possible. I knew English for the first time in my first year of junior high school. Since then, English has always been one of my favorite subjects. When I decided to enter Vocational High School, one of my considerations was to get a more manageable job. I was unsure if I could continue my studies at university even if I wanted to because my parents did not have enough money. The TOEIC scholarship allowed me to continue my studies at university, and it gave me a change that changed many things in my life. Therefore, I decided to take English education and become an English teacher since I was thankful for that. In addition, I also joined many English debate competitions as a vocational high school and university student. It gave me many experiences, and I traveled to many places and met many people. Through a scholarship from the US Department of State, I had an opportunity to study English at Iowa State University in 2011 for a summer course program. During the program, I learned English both in the classroom with lecturers who are native speakers and outside the classroom with American friends and international students from other countries. Many experiences and opportunities came to my life through the English language, so I am always motivated to be a good English teacher.

For me, learning a different language is always fascinating. The existence of various languages itself is already incredible, so I am always motivated to learn foreign languages. Another opportunity came to me. I got a scholarship to learn Chinese in China for one year, and it was a fantastic experience. I have always hoped to have another opportunity to learn Arabic because Arabic is the language of the Quran. Even though I can read the Qur'an, I do not understand the language. I sometimes feel guilty that I can speak English and Chinese but do not understand Arabic, which is close to my religion.

2. How My Religious Beliefs Construction Influences My Professional Identity

My experiences and interactions shaped my views about teaching English and influenced my teaching practices. As my life experiences shaped my knowledge, perception, and beliefs about teaching English, they also shaped my religious beliefs. I learned more about my religion during my studies at university by meeting many people, listening to many preachers, and going through many sad and happy moments. In the past, I might have believed that English was the one that opened many opportunities for me, but now I believe that God is always the one who gives me every opportunity. English is only a medium.

Studying at university allowed me to learn general knowledge related to English teaching as my major. In addition, especially outside the classroom, university life opens broader opportunities to access religious knowledge through religious organizations, events, books, and other sources. These accesses allow me to reconstruct my religious beliefs and motivate me to be a better Muslim. As a Muslim, I always regret that I did not learn Arabic seriously as I always studied at public schools that had no Arabic subject. Thus, as an English teacher and a Muslim, I sometimes face a dilemma. As an English teacher on one side, I try my best to make my Muslim students achieve the learning goals in my English classroom.

However, as a Muslim teacher, I hope they study Arabic before English because they are Muslims, and Arabic is essential to study as a Muslim because Arabic is the language of prayers and worship in Islam.

In addition to my role as an English teacher responsible for my students' English learning, I feel responsible as a Muslim educator to assist their religious development. I hope my Muslim students grow and develop into individuals who are proficient in English and pious. I felt this feeling mainly when I taught English at an Islamic school where all students are Muslims. In brief, I feel a stronger bond with my Muslim students because I am not only their English teacher but also their religious mentor. However, I ensure that these two roles do not hinder each other; instead, they support each other.

Religious beliefs construct how English teacher's views of their students. Students are viewed not only as English learners but also as religious followers, especially when they are Muslims. Many teachers motivate their students by emphasizing that learning English opens ways to the global world, to get a job quickly in the global market competition, and other reasons such as prestige, lifestyle, etc. However, my religious beliefs influence the way I motivate my students. I tell my students that God's calling is the first and most important reason for learning. Learning a foreign language will help us understand how great God's miracle is in language diversity; God created human beings with diverse physical appearances and characteristics, and God makes the languages varied excellently. As a Muslim teacher, I try to develop these beliefs and views in my Muslim students as internal motivation for learning.

Even though until now, my longest teaching experience was teaching Muslim students at Islamic schools, when I teach non-Muslim students in a private course, like when I taught in West Papua, and now I teach at a general college, I treat all my students similarly in preparing them with English competencies. My religious beliefs still influence my professional identity, but Islam always teaches the followers to be kind to all human beings despite their religion because Islam is *rahmatan lil alamin*. This belief directs me to always act friendly with my non-Muslim students, respect them, be fair with them, control my anger, and avoid insulting or being rude. I always see myself as a Muslim representative in front of my non-Muslim students. I want them to see a Muslim teacher as a fair and friendly teacher whom they can depend on. I respect my students' religious beliefs. I focus on communicating with them well to provide good images of Muslims.

Despite the significant influence of religious beliefs in my professional identity as an English teacher, I have experienced living in different countries such as Malaysia, the United States of America, and China. I have many foreign friends with different cultures and religions. I have interacted with many people with diverse characteristics and backgrounds. These experiences have also shaped my perspectives and my identities, both my religious identity and professional identity. I have become an open-minded individual and moderate Muslim follower; I always try to put myself in other's shoes, meaning that I try to understand other people's actions considering their social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. I do not easily judge other's actions and do not feel reluctant to change and adapt to different situations including in the context of professional life as an English teacher.

3. My Teaching Practices

In teaching, I try to integrate religious teachings/ values with English classes when teaching at an Islamic school. I select or prepare teaching materials containing and promoting the values of Islam in the forms of vocabularies, songs, reading

passages, stories, etc. I also try to tell my students why they should study foreign languages (English) from the perspectives of religions and how they benefit from their English proficiency in their religion. I sometimes tell my experiences when I lived abroad and communicated with foreign people using a language I mastered. I emphasize to my students that communication with others is not simply allowing others to understand what we mean. It is also related to their perception of us as Muslims. Suppose we can communicate well with foreign people, mainly when they are curious about Islam. In that case, it will create a good perception of Islam, which is how we can benefit from our foreign language proficiency for our religiosity.

In relation to the quality of my English teaching, I feel my religious beliefs also influence how I always try to be a responsible and professional teacher. Islam teaches the followers that we will be held responsible for each job, duty, or task given to us not only in the world but also in the hereafter. This belief always motivates me to do my job as an English teacher professionally. So, I try to always come to class on time, teach my students effectively, and evaluate their progress and achievements fairly. I believe that God always sees my best works and my negligence upon my job will also get consequences from God.

E. Discussion

My experiences and interactions with friends, teachers, religious preachers, colleagues, and people around me led me to deepen my religiosity and construct my perspectives and beliefs about my professional identity as an English teacher. Granjo et al. (2021) mentioned that teacher identity is co-constructed with interaction with social, cultural, and professional environments. In my case, I feel that my experiences while studying at university have had a significant impact on the construction of my life direction, career, dreams, and professional identity as an English teacher.

English teachers must undoubtedly notify English learning goals to let students know the significance of English in their futures and motivate students to have an interest in learning the language and its cultural aspects (Dunifa, 2024; Mambu, 2023; Qoyyimah et al., 2023; Ramzan et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2024), yet in my perspective, when I teach Muslim students, this could be positioned in the second place. The first place must always be God's calling to initiate any activities or decisions we make in life, including in learning. However, when I teach both Muslim and non-Muslim students, I paraphrase my language to be accepted by all students despite their religious backgrounds.

Qoyyimah et al. (2023) mentioned that the strong bonding of teachers on their national and cultural identities, while having less connection to the target culture, also leads to questions regarding what knowledge and competence the teachers want to transfer to their students. I try to highlight "having less connection to the target culture" because, in my case, I have experienced living in some countries such as the United States, China, and Malaysia. I also have many foreign friends and always respect their cultures, which differ from mine. However, I still prefer to first put local culture or the culture in my religious context. I hope that these cultures are ones my students will internalize in themselves. I believe that it is also critical to introduce global and target cultures through English for multicultural understanding. I hope my students will be individuals who respect each other despite different cultures.

When teaching at an Islamic school, I integrate religious teachings/ values with English classes. This aligns with Tajeddin et al. (2021) that selecting teaching materials that do not contradict religious values manifests religious teachers' behaviors and performances as profoundly affected by their religious background. While integrating

Islamic values into my English teaching, I open my students' views about other people's values that may differ from our values as Muslims. Therefore, I teach my students multicultural understanding, how to be open-minded, and how to respect diversity. I do not think that teaching English as a global language is a part of colonization. I also do not believe that understanding other cultures is a form of degrading our culture, as some teachers may believe (Bukrieieva & Afanasieva, 2021; Davies, 2024; Eslamdoost et al., 2020; Nasie, 2023; Qoyyimah et al., 2023; Ren, 2022; Schnell & Ervas, 2022; Shapira & Mola, 2022). I only perceive English as a means of communication. I can still learn or teach English and keep my values and cultures while paying respect to other values and cultures.

When teaching both Muslim and non-Muslim students, my religious beliefs direct me to always act friendly, respect them, be fair with them, control my anger, and avoid insulting or being rude. I also try to carry out my professional duty as an English teacher responsibly because every duty will be held responsible by God in the world and the hereafter. This shows how religious beliefs influence teacher's behaviors and performances positively (Baurain, 2012; Filipović & Jurišić, 2024; Héliot et al., 2020; Kumar, 2024; Qureshi & Shahjehan, 2021; Salter & Tett, 2021; Tajeddin et al., 2021).

In brief, I realize that my religious beliefs influence my professional identity and practices as an English teacher. While I prioritize my religious beliefs in my life and try to educate my students to have intense religiosity, I never neglect my responsibility to equip them with the English competencies they need to communicate well in a global world. This is consistent with Irfiana et al. (2021) research findings that a teacher's identity is undoubtedly affected by religious beliefs and social values, which affect how the teacher teaches. Along with the teaching experience, there is no identity crisis and difficulties in implementing the identity. Teachers can still distinguish between their roles as teachers and as individuals.

F. Conclusion

English has accompanied me for more than 20 years. Writing this autoethnography allowed me to reflect deeply on the paths I have chosen and passed through during my experiences as an English learner and teacher and to reassess the reasons for my educational journey to continue. It allowed me to find meaning in my work and develop a willingness to grow into a better English teacher. While I do not claim that my personal experience prescriptively represents the experiences of other teachers or those preparing to become educators, I hope this autoethnography encourages us to critically examine our cultural beliefs, positionality, practices, and subjectivities as teachers. As an English teacher, I hope to assist my students in the English learning process and help them be better individuals in their religiosity and English competencies. To realize this, I believe diverse perceptions in ELT must be respected. This study relies heavily on the researcher's personal experiences, which can lead to subjective interpretations, making it difficult to generalize to broader populations. Future researchers can use different types of approaches, such as surveys and other quantitative methods to make the results more appropriate to generalize.

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