

 Research Article

Bridging Languages and Faith: A Pictorial Approach to Teaching Basic Islam to Bilingual Children

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Abstract

Bilingual children often encounter greater challenges in school than their monolingual peers, particularly when dealing with abstract concepts and religious education. Teaching the fundamentals of Islam in English is difficult due to the limited availability of locally relevant resources. To address this gap, “My First Handbook of Islam” was developed through four stages involving Islamic scholars, linguists, educators, and illustrators. The book was distributed to schools and Islamic centres, with 1,100 copies disseminated nationally and internationally. This study assessed bilingual children’s attitudes toward the book using a descriptive, quantitative, cross-sectional survey. A total of 104 bilingual children aged 10 to 12 participated, recruited through convenience sampling with parental consent. The instrument consisted of structured questionnaire items (5-point Likert scale), covering vocabulary, comprehension, engagement, sharing, and motivation. The tool achieved good internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.82). Data were collected through paper-based surveys, supervised in classrooms after guided reading sessions, and analysed using SPSS v27. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean) were applied, with interpretation guided by mean scales. Findings showed that students unanimously valued the book, reporting improved vocabulary acquisition, enthusiasm for Islamic knowledge, and enjoyment of illustrations. The pictorial approach bridged language gaps, reduced cognitive load, and increased engagement through culturally relevant visuals. The book was also used for sharing knowledge with siblings, peers, and teachers, though less so with parents due to language mismatches. The study concludes that pictorial Islamic texts are effective for bilingual learning and can be further enhanced through integration into digital formats such as interactive e-books and mobile apps. Implications are drawn for teachers, parents, curriculum designers, and Islamic educational institutions, especially in multicultural settings.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Children, Islamic Education, Pictorial Learning, Comprehension

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Dual Language Programme (DLP) is a government-led initiative introduced under the policy “Empowering Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthening English,” and it functions in a manner comparable to a bilingual education program. In Malaysia, the DLP was first implemented in selected primary and secondary schools in 2016.

With respect to English language development, the programme is designed to enhance students' language proficiency. By enabling teachers to deliver instruction in English, the DLP promotes more frequent and meaningful use of the language among both teachers and students. Over time, this increased exposure contributes to stronger overall competence in English, encompassing vocabulary acquisition, grammatical accuracy, and conversational fluency.

Somehow, teaching bilingual children has its own loops as well. Most of the children may find it difficult to understand certain abstract and complex ideas (Costa, 2001). The Muslim bilingual children, for example, face the hardship to understand the basic knowledge of Islam in English. To make things worse, these days the media presents its content with a very warped image of Islam. There are far too many misunderstandings and prejudices stemming from ignorance about Islam itself. At a certain juncture, some of the media messages are not reaching the target group of readers, which can be very confusing (Walker, 2017). There are also times when the language use and approaches are not suitable for the young readers (Shtulman, 2007). As this happens through the media, it is through the media that the wrong ideals and thoughts can be corrected. Referring to the bilingual children, it is timely that they can be indulged with the correct basic ideas of what Islam is all about.

1.1. Literature Review

Bilingualism has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years, with a growing body of research indicating that bilingual children may demonstrate cognitive benefits compared to their monolingual counterparts. For example, Bialystok (2018) reported that bilingual children perform better than monolinguals on tasks assessing executive functions. In contrast, other investigations have failed to identify significant effects of bilingualism on cognition (Gunnerud et al., 2020). Furthermore, Blom et al. (2017) conducted a comparative study involving three groups of bilingual children in the Netherlands and a monolingual control group to examine whether cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism are shaped by the sociolinguistic context of language use. Their findings revealed that bilingual children surpassed monolinguals in selective attention tasks, with the strongest effects observed among Frisian–Dutch bilinguals and a subgroup of migrant children who demonstrated relatively high proficiency in Polish. These results imply that the cognitive outcomes of bilingualism are contingent upon the sociolinguistic environment in which children develop. Similarly, Yow and Li (2015) suggested that balanced bilingualism and early acquisition of a second language may serve as key mechanisms underlying advantages in executive control among bilinguals. Collectively, these perspectives underscore the critical role of variability in bilingual experiences and proficiency levels in shaping the cognitive benefits linked to bilingualism.

1.1.1. Home Environment

Children develop their ability to speak two or more languages due to the environmental factors they are exposed to. The development of both primary and second languages is found to be associated with home and school environment (Kwakkel et al., 2023). Zhang et al. (2023) found that the home environment plays a significant role in the development of English as a second language for children. They stated that numerous home environmental factors contributed positively to the children's ability to acquire the second language, such as the influences of family demographics, home language, literacy environment, and the motivations parents have adopted at home. These were culturally appropriate and implied for Asian-family contexts. This result is consistent with the findings of Sun (2019), which demonstrate that exposure to home-based literacy, including literacy activities and the availability of literacy materials, plays a crucial role in supporting children's language development and literacy practices. Key external factors within the home environment that influence bilingual children's language proficiency include parental socio-economic status, the quantity of linguistic input, and the dominant language used by mothers in interactions with their children at home. It has been seen that parents with higher education have higher levels of family income, correlated with a larger influence on language learning in children. This is linked directly to higher-quality communication parents have with their children (Evi et al., 2023). There are also other home environment effects, such as parents' education, volume of books, and any informal literacy activities provided at home, which strongly indicate the language and vocabulary acquired by a child. Thus, parents' roles highly stimulate children's receptive language development at a young age, by having shared-reading activities and

active interaction with the children using the second language at home. Furthermore, research indicates that greater time spent using a second language (L2) in the home environment is associated with stronger L2 vocabulary development in children (Kwakkel et al., 2023). This finding aligns with previous studies demonstrating that the proportion of language exposure at home plays a crucial role in children's language acquisition. Notably, the influence of linguistic exposure emerges early in childhood (Lauro et al., 2020).

1.1.2. School Setting

Beyond the influence of the natural environment, where children acquire and use language implicitly, formal education plays a significant role in dual language acquisition by facilitating a more deliberate and structured language learning process (Wang & Lehtomäki, 2022). Ong and Ting (n.d.) argued that the language used in school has a profound impact on shaping children's primary language practices. Formal educational settings and schooling experiences contribute to the development of children's language preferences, particularly toward the language of instruction used in schools. Consequently, educational institutions have a crucial responsibility in fostering bilingual competence from an early age. Pre-school education and its surrounding environment, therefore, establish a critical foundation for language learning and make a positive contribution to children's bilingual development (Köktürk et al., 2016). This process involves the implementation of bilingual education, in which the second language is consistently used as the medium of classroom instruction. Accordingly, it demands high levels of teacher professionalism, pedagogical competence, and the ability to deliver bilingual instruction across different subject areas. In support of school-based bilingualism, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has introduced a Dual Language Programme (DLP) in selected public primary schools as an initiative to enhance students' proficiency in both Bahasa Melayu and English, with English serving as the medium of instruction for content subjects. In ensuring the success of the bilingual programme at school, the qualified and trained teachers and the bilingual strategy in classroom teaching are deemed essential (Suliman et al., 2021). Despite the teachers' language proficiency in English, teachers' competence in pedagogical content knowledge is also required for a successful bilingual programme. It requires teachers' skills and knowledge on the integration of content, language, and learning approaches of their own teaching subject into a classroom (Scherzinger & Brahm, 2023). To advocate effective dual language instruction and bilingual students' learning development at school, the expertise of teachers, the school community, facilities, as well as the cooperation between teachers, parents, and students, are significantly essential. In-house professional training for the teachers must also be provided to make the bilingual teaching and learning process a success (Masooona Noori and Mahroosa Noori, 2023).

1.1.3. Being Bilingual within the Islamic Setting

This paper focuses on the output of using an Islamic book among bilingual children. In Malaysia, Islamic religious education plays a strategic role in strengthening character education in the era of Industrial Revolution 4.0. Most of the parents start to realise the importance of equipping their children to be proficient in English and devoted to Islam at the same time.

For example, Bein (2011) discusses the role of Islamic education in moral and ethical development, highlighting the significance of traditional teachings and the preservation of religious values. The findings suggest that Islamic education serves as a guardian of tradition while also being an agent of change. Future research could delve deeper into the adaptive strategies used within Islamic education to address contemporary challenges and societal changes. Meanwhile, Bakken et al. (2017) emphasize the long-term benefits of early childhood education, which extend to various aspects of children's development. Islamic education, as a component of early childhood education, contributes significantly to these long-term benefits. The incorporation of Islamic teachings and values in early childhood education programs can lead to positive outcomes in children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. In addition, according to Taufik (2020), Islamic education is essential in instilling Islamic principles and values in individuals. The study highlights the importance of Islamic religious education in shaping the character of individuals and fostering moral development. This emphasizes the significance of integrating Islamic principles and values into educational systems to promote ethical conduct and spiritual growth (Taufik, 2020). Furthermore, Ikhwan et al. (2020) emphasize the revitalization of Islamic education teachers in the development of

student personality. This underscores the crucial role of educators in imparting Islamic principles and values to students, thereby influencing their personal and moral development. It is worth noting too that integrating Islamic values and science for millennial students' learning using seamless mobile media is another approach that has been explored by Fahyuni et al. (2020). This study sheds light on the potential for integrating technology and religious values in educational practices, which can be adapted to assist bilingual children with Islamic education.

From a different perspective, the significance of Islamic education for bilingual children is an area of growing interest and importance, particularly in the context of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. While there is a substantial body of research on bilingual education and its effects, the specific focus on Islamic education for bilingual children is relatively limited. Bialystok (2018) provides a comprehensive review of the effects and consequences of bilingual education for young children. However, the significance of Islamic education is not directly addressed in this study. Similarly, Veliyeva (2015) discusses bilingualism in education but does not delve into the specific significance of Islamic education for bilingual children.

The study by Ware (2014) on Islamic education, embodied knowledge, and history in West Africa also does not directly address the significance of Islamic education for bilingual children. The absence of research on this specific topic highlights a significant knowledge gap in the literature. In the context of bilingualism and language development, Dixon et al. (2012) explore the home and community factors influencing bilingual children's ethnic language vocabulary development. While this study contributes to our understanding of bilingualism, it does not specifically address Islamic education as a factor in bilingual language development. The findings from the existing literature underscore the need for further research on the significance of Islamic education for bilingual children. Given the increasing diversity of linguistic and cultural backgrounds in educational settings, understanding the role of Islamic education in bilingualism and its impact on children's language development is essential. Future research in this area should aim to address the following knowledge gaps. Firstly, studies should investigate the specific effects of Islamic education on bilingual children's language acquisition and proficiency. Additionally, examining the influence of Islamic education on the cultural and religious identity of bilingual children is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of this topic. Furthermore, research should explore the intersection of Islamic education with broader educational policies and practices, particularly in multicultural and multilingual educational contexts. Understanding how Islamic education can be integrated into bilingual education programs and curricula is essential for promoting inclusive and effective educational practices for bilingual children from Islamic backgrounds.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

Books with pictures can be a very good platform to spread the teaching of Islam. At a most basic level, picture books help readers, especially children and beginners, to understand that words convey meaning, connecting the pictures in the book with the words on the page [4,5]. They can check pictures on the page for background knowledge or contextual clues for their understanding of Islam. They can even associate the description of certain events that are pertinent in the Islamic calendar.

The idea to produce "*My first handbook of Islam*" arose when some parents whose children speak English found that there were not many Islamic books written in English in the market. If there are any, most books are imported and do not reflect the Islamic scenario of this region. The spellings are varied and very confusing, not only to the children but also to those converts who want to know more about Islam.

This book is an effort to spread the authentic knowledge of Islam, especially for bilingual children, with the following research objectives:

- (i) Exploring the attitudes of bilingual children towards the "*My first handbook of Islam*."
- (ii) Investigating the demographic data of the attitudes of bilingual children towards the "*My first handbook of Islam*."

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine bilingual children's attitudes toward the pictorial Islamic book.

2.2. Participants

A total of 104 bilingual children aged 10 to 12 participated, comprising 40 males and 64 females. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, facilitated by school administrators. All students were enrolled in the Dual Language Programme (DLP). Parental consent was obtained through official letters before participation.

2.3. Instruments

A structured questionnaire was used, consisting of 25 items divided into five constructs: (1) reading patterns, (2) attitudes toward the book, (3) comprehension and vocabulary, (4) sharing and motivation, and (5) recommendations. Items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The instrument achieved Cronbach's alpha = 0.82, indicating good internal consistency.

2.4. Procedures

The book was given to students for two weeks as reading material. Afterward, classroom sessions were conducted in small groups (15 students each), supervised by teachers and researchers. Each item was read aloud and explained to ensure understanding. Surveys were administered paper-based under supervision. Students also had opportunities for Q&A to make sessions enjoyable and less tense.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS v27. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means) were computed. Results were interpreted using the following mean scale: 1.00–2.49 = Low, 2.50–3.49 = Moderate, 3.50–5.00 = High/Strong.

3. FINDINGS

A total of 104 students aged between 10 and 12 years old (as in Table 1) received approval from their parents to take part in the study.

The question and answer consist of five parts: reading patterns, response attitude towards the book, content views of the book, illustrations, and motivation.

Table 1. Number of Participants

Number of Participants	Gender	
	Male	Female
Age		
10	16 (15.4%)	24 (23.1%)
11	12 (11.5%)	16 (15.4%)
12	12 (11.5%)	24 (23.1%)
Total	40 (38.5%)	64 (61.5%)

There are 104 bilingual children taking part in the study. Forty of them are males, and 64 are females. They range in age from 10 to 12 years old. These are phase II pupils.

Table 2. Reading Pattern of the Participants

Reading Patterns of Participants				
1. Do you read story books?	Yes		No	
	100		0	
2. Which type of books do you read more?	Malay Books		English Book	
	46 (44.2%)		58 (55.8%)	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
	22 (21.2%)	24 (23.1%)	18 (17.3%)	40 (38.5%)
3. Do you read books about Islam?	Yes		No	
	71 (68.3%)		33 (31.7%)	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
	31 (29.8%)	40 (38.5%)	9 (8.7%)	24 (23.1%)
4. Do you read English books about Islam	Yes		No	
	96 (92.3%)		8 (7.7%)	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
	38 (36.5%)	58 (55.8%)	2 (1.9%)	6 (5.8%)
5. Do you buy English books about Islam?	Yes		No	
	56 (53.8%)		48 (46.2%)	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
	15 (14.4%)	41 (39.4%)	25 (24%)	23 (22.1%)

Table 2 shows the reading pattern of the participants. There are five questions, and their feedback is shown in the table 2. As they are bilingual, most children prefer English books (55.8%) compared to Malay books (44.2%). They also read books about Islam (close to 70%), and almost all of them are exposed to Islamic books. Somehow, only half (53.8%) buy such books, and female children have a more positive reading pattern compared to the males.

Table 3. Attitudes Towards the Book Used: *My First Handbook of Islam*

Items	Boys	Girls
The vocabulary in the book is helping me a lot	35 (33.7%)	64 (61.5%)
Some of the vocabularies are new to me	40 (38.5%)	63 (60.6%)
The pictures enable me to associate the storyline	28 (26.9%)	55 (52.9%)
“My First Handbook of Islam” is a very interesting book	39 (37.5%)	64 (61.5%)

35 boys say the vocabulary in the book is helping them a lot, compared to 64 girls with the same. 40 boys and 63 girls say some of the vocabularies are new to them. 28 boys and 55 girls claim they can guess the meaning of the vocabulary and the phrases based on the pictures. As a whole, the bilingual children who get involved in the study have good attitudes toward the book used in the study.

Table 4. Does *My First Handbook of Islam* Help You To Share Its Content?

Items	Boys	Girls
I read the book again and again	28 (26.9%)	55 (52.9%)
I can share the book with my younger siblings	40 (38.5%)	63 (60.6%)
I can share the book with my friends	40 (50%)	64 (50%)
I can share the book with my parents	17 (42.5%)	27 (42.19%)

This table highlights how bilingual children use the book as a social resource—not just for private reading, but for sharing and engagement. The fact that more than half the girls re-read the book and share it with siblings indicates that the book resonates with their experiences and is cognitively stimulating. Repeated readings enhance children’s confidence and familiarity with the vocabulary and narrative, supporting theories on repeated exposure and language development (Elley, 1989; Jiang, 2002). Meanwhile, the ability to share with siblings and friends shows how the book serves as a bridge for informal religious discourse, facilitating knowledge transfer within and beyond the classroom (Sun et al., 2019). However, the significantly lower parental engagement underscores a key challenge in bilingual households: children may

lack opportunities to share English-language religious texts at home due to language preferences or limited English literacy among parents (Kwakkel et al., 2023; Lauro et al., 2020).

Table 5. Recommendations on the Books to Others

Items	Boys	Girls
I would see the continuity of the book	40(100.0%)	60(93.75%)
As a whole, the book is better than e-book	25(62.5%)	35(54.69%)
I would ask my teacher to share the book in the class	36(90.0%)	57(89.06%)
I don't mind to give the book as a gift to others	31(77.5%)	60(93.75%)

This table reveals children's attitudinal endorsement of the book as a high-quality learning resource. The high percentage of children (especially girls) wanting more books or sequels indicates not only satisfaction but also a desire to deepen their learning of Islamic concepts through English. This aligns with Taufik (2020), who emphasized the value of early and consistent Islamic education in identity development. The preference for print over digital confirms that physical books remain pedagogically valuable, especially for younger children who benefit from tactile engagement and focused, screen-free reading environments (Walker, 2017). Interestingly, a large portion of students would recommend the book to teachers or give it as a gift, suggesting affective attachment, a key factor in lifelong reading habits and religious identity formation. As Bein (2011) and Fahyuni et al. (2020) observed, materials that connect religious learning with cultural relevance and visual appeal are more likely to inspire long-term engagement.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that bilingual children demonstrated consistently positive attitudes towards *My First Handbook of Islam*, suggesting that the pictorial English-language resource effectively supported both engagement and comprehension of basic Islamic concepts. Additionally, the study found that having such a book directly affected the children's vocabulary knowledge, especially with the Islamic themes and genres. They were eager and excited to associate their life as Muslims with the book's contents. The reason why the children did not share the books at home as much as at school justifies why their sharing sessions were fewer with parents compared with friends and teachers. Research by Bialystok et al. (2010) concluded that there are differences in the vocabulary used at home and at school. The children in this study had a lower average score on sharing the book content at home with parents than at school with teachers and friends. While the specific words that were tested may not be known in English when they want to share them at home with parents, the children may refer to friends and teachers in the school environment. If these children had a greater knowledge of English vocabulary, they would be better able to connect a new meaning with an existing semantic in their L1 (Jiang, 2002). It is important to emphasize that they were keen on reading the book several times. This again confirms that repeated reading from a picture book can be effective in promoting language development in young children (Brett et al., 1996; Elley, 1989).

The positive outcomes from using the pictorial book can also be explained through Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), which posits that well-designed visuals reduce extraneous cognitive burden, allowing learners to focus on meaningful content. The illustrations served as culturally relevant cues, bridging gaps between English vocabulary and Islamic concepts, aligning with Mayer's (2001) principles of multimedia learning. Engagement increased as children identified familiar cultural-religious imagery, strengthening contextual comprehension and motivation (Walker, 2017). The results also echo findings that repeated reading of illustrated texts supports vocabulary retention and confidence (Elley, 1989; Jiang, 2002). Importantly, the pictorial method encouraged social learning: children shared the book with siblings and peers, confirming Vygotskian perspectives on knowledge transfer in informal settings. However, limited parental sharing reflects household linguistic mismatches, consistent with Kwakkel et al. (2023). Collectively, these findings underscore the pedagogical power of culturally relevant pictorial resources in bilingual Islamic education.

As a whole, being bilingual has been widely seen as positive. Indisputably, numerous advantages for bilingual children have been highlighted by many researchers. One of the most significant benefits of bilingualism is that children have the ability to speak more than one language, providing them a window to

the world, which benefits them in working life, travel, and communication with people of diverse backgrounds (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). This is consistent with the findings by Nabila Abdul Malek (2024), which state that bilinguals are open to wider opportunities to connect to vast information, opinions, and cultural insights beyond their first language. Not only that, but being competent in multiple languages fosters employment opportunities and boosts self-development in non-formal environments. Bilingualism also enhances thinking flexibility, cultural empathy, and creativity, supported by cognitive mechanisms that help manage language conflicts (Antoniou, 2018; Poarch & Krott, 2019). Furthermore, bilingualism is associated with delayed cognitive aging and greater socio-emotional growth (Sun et al., 2021). These wider benefits reinforce the importance of nurturing bilingual learning environments, particularly through innovative and culturally relevant tools such as pictorial Islamic texts.

5. CONCLUSION

Bilingualism does not cause confusion and is not intrinsically associated with detrimental developmental outcomes (Goetz, 2003). Moreover, bilingual children demonstrate socio-cognitive advantages, especially in their ability to comprehend their own beliefs as well as those of others, comparable to or exceeding those of monolingual children. They bring a lot of energy and enthusiasm to teaching and learning, and teachers must make use of that energy in creating a positive learning atmosphere (Bloom, 1993). In the case of this study, introducing a book with new dimensions clearly attracted bilingual children to read and study its content with passion. In terms of Islam and its teaching, it has been laid down in the Qur'an and Sunnah to teach children at a young age in their daily lives (Hoot, 2003). It is greatly hoped that this book can become a meaningful part of bilingual children's lives, allowing them to live, experience, and breathe Islam as their core belief, truly and wholeheartedly.

This study also confirms that pictorial approaches offer an effective medium to teach Islamic fundamentals to bilingual children, enhancing vocabulary, comprehension, and engagement. Beyond summarizing results, the findings hold several practical implications:

1. Teachers can adopt pictorial texts as supplementary tools to reduce cognitive load and boost comprehension in religious classes.
2. Curriculum designers may integrate bilingual pictorial resources into formal syllabi, ensuring culturally relevant and accessible materials.
3. Parents and Islamic institutions can encourage at-home engagement with such resources to foster early identity formation and faith-based literacy.
4. In multicultural Islamic schools, this approach can bridge language gaps, fostering inclusivity and cross-cultural understanding.

Additionally, given the global shift toward digital learning, the pictorial approach should be adapted into interactive e-books, mobile applications, and digital platforms. Such integration can broaden accessibility, particularly for diasporic and multilingual Muslim communities. The findings, therefore, highlight the dual importance of maintaining cultural authenticity while embracing technological innovation in Islamic pedagogy.

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