

## Quranic Understanding among Non-Native Speaker of Arabic: Malaysian Experts' Perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

The relationship between language and religion is complex and past studies have shown the importance of language and religion. In Islam, the most fundamental religious text that Muslims refer to is the Qur'an. Appreciating and understanding the Qur'an are fundamental for the believers of Islam to understand their religion. The Qur'an was revealed in the Arabic language. Hence, the aim of the study was two-pronged. One was to understand the importance of possessing knowledge of Arabic among non-native speakers of Arabic to understand the Qur'an and the other was to identify how non-native speakers of Arabic use the knowledge of Arabic to understand the Qur'an. The study employed exploratory design. A semi-structured interview method was used to collect data from five non-native speakers of Arabic. The collected interview data were analysed through thematic analysis. Results revealed that there was a need to have knowledge in Arabic to understand the Qur'an. Findings also showed that non-native speakers of Arabic comprehend the Qur'an in three ways. One was using the translation approach; another was the lexical approach and the final one was using the linguistics approach. Thus, this has pedagogical implication. The teaching and learning to comprehend the Qur'an can be conducted in Arabic for specific purposes classes. The focus is on the Classical Arabic which encompasses the three approaches.

**Keywords:** Arabic non-native speaker; Arabic language; Qur'anic understanding; Malaysia

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between language and religion is complex. This complexity can be seen in the relationship between Islam and the Arabic language, Judaism and the Hebrew language, and Hinduism and the Sanskrit language, and other religions and the languages used. Liddicoat highlights the importance of language and religion, and how it plays a significant role in communication between religion and its faithful believers and how believers participate in it (Liddicoat, 2012).

In Islam, the most fundamental religious text that Muslims refer to is the Holy Qur'an. The Qur'an was revealed in the Arabic language, and the original text has remained unchanged in that language since the time of its revelation. Appreciating and understanding the Qur'an are fundamental for the believers of Islam to understand their religion. The texts written in the Qur'an are not just meant to be read, recited, and memorised. Its messages and teachings need to be understood, appreciated and applied in life as guidance in every aspect of a Muslim's life (Manaf et al., 2017; Rahman, S.A. et al., 2017). This is the reason why the Qur'an has been translated into African, Asian, and European languages. It is for the understanding of all Muslims worldwide, especially the non-native speakers of Arabic. There was a total of 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide and the number is expected to have risen to 2.2 billion by 2020 (Zulfakar, Chan & Jie, 2018). One-fifth of the overall 1.6 billion of Muslim populations live in countries where Islam is not the official religion of the country (Aznam & Kamaruzaman, 2006; Saeed, 2004; Wilson & Liu, 2010). And past studies have shown that most Muslims worldwide come from the non-Arabic speaking background.

Many studies have been conducted within the context of enhancing the Quranic knowledge of non-native speakers of Arabic. They include studies focusing on exploring the relationship between Arabic language with Qur'anic understanding (Ikhwanuddin & Hashim, 2014), identifying the best Arabic language learning strategies to cultivate Qur'anic understanding (Hilmi, 2013; Loan, 2012; Sultana, 2009; Wekke, Nurhayati & Farid, 2016) and the construction of special education system suitable for the Qur'anic studies context (Noh et al., 2013; Sai, 2017). In the Malaysian context, there are also a number of studies conducted with similar focus ranging from primary school to the tertiary education levels (Ahmad, Zin & Sakat, 2012; Hussin et al., 2016; Neamah et al., 2017).

Despite the availability of a wide range of studies, we argue that they lack an extremely crucial point which is an in-depth qualitative finding on how non-native Arabic speakers understand the Quran. Thus, an in-depth qualitative comprehensive research is timely. Based on the above, this study aims to provide a comprehensive examination and discussion on the importance of knowledge of Arabic to understand the Qur'an and how the non-native speakers of Arabic comprehend the Qur'an in Malaysian context.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ARABIC QURANIC LANGUAGE

Most major religions in this world have their exclusive sacred scriptures which contain the teaching of their religions (e.g. Bible for Christianity, Tanakh and Talmud for Judaism, Tipitaka for Buddhism). As for Islam, the sacred scripture is Qur'an. This sacred scripture contains comprehensive teachings for Muslims to observe and abide by. It covers three main aspects of a Muslim's life: belief, law and morality (Fadl, 2017; Rahman, S.A. et al., 2017). As the Qur'an was originally in Arabic and being revealed for the deciphers to truly comprehend, appreciate and adhere to the teachings of the Qur'an, it is imperative that one masters the Arabic language. Muslim scholars stress on the importance of Muslims to have competence in this language in order to understand and interpret the Qur'an. Imam Malik bin Anas, one of great Muslim Jurists in the eighteenth century, said that: "If anyone who is not knowledgeable of

Arabic Language tries to interpret the book of Allah, it will only make him an exemplary punishment” (mentioned by Zarabozo, 1999, p.235). The importance of having competence in the Arabic language is also emphasised by Ibn Taymiyyah (1971) who mentioned that:

“The Arabic Language is from the Religion, and the knowledge of it is an obligation. For surely the understanding of the Qur’an and the Sunnah is an obligation, and these two are not understood except with the understanding of the Arabic Language, and whatever obligation is not fulfilled except by certain steps then those steps themselves become obligatory to fulfil the initial obligation”.  
(p. 146)

Therefore, without knowledge and mastery of the Arabic language, misunderstanding or misinterpretation may occur when one reads and studies the Qur’an especially when the understanding is to derive from the context of the Qur’anic verses (Ramli et al., 2018). The result may be catastrophic.

Bello (2015) stressed on the importance of mastering classical Arabic in understanding Islamic law or *Shari’ah*, as the laws are derived from the Qur’an and Hadith which are in Arabic. The specific vocabularies used consist of comprehensive meanings and without knowledge of classical Arabic, it would be difficult to translate it. Thus, in order to understand the rules of Islamic law, this can only be achieved if stylistic peculiarities of classical Arabic language, and its lexical meanings and structure are understood. Below is an example taken from a verse in the Al-Quran (Surah al-Maidah, 5:6) related to the Islamic law:

وَأَمْسَحُوا بِرُءُوسِكُمْ  
*Wa imsahuu bi ru’usikum* ‘and pass your wet hands over your heads’

The verse above is related to ablution, which is an Islamic procedure of purification before performing the prayer or *Solat*. It involves washing the hands, mouth, nostrils, arms, head and feet with water. The Arabic verb “*imsahuu*” is connected to the letter *Ba* (ب) which has two meanings in Arabic grammar. The first is *Ba al-Za’idah* or additional letter used for emphasising the statement and the second is *Ba al-Tab’id* or portioning preposition. The first meaning of the preposition, the injunction will mean that the whole head should be rubbed with water, while the second meaning the injunction will denote the rubbing of part of the head, and not necessarily the whole head. This exhibits that linguistic features of Arabic need to be noted when interpreting the Quran to get the accurate intended meaning.

Hedayet (2013) studied the application of contextuality and linguistic meaning in comprehending the text of Qur’an. Findings from his study show that due to the high level of Arabic language of the Qur’an which consists of language properties, sound symbolism, linguistic forms, rhyme, word play, irony, and metaphors that exceed the standard Arabic language, any attempt to comprehend the Quran using only linguistic meaning may lead to misreading and misinterpreting. This is because the interpreter’s local values and customs may play an influence and have an impact when interpreting the Qur’an. He therefore proposed an integrated approach between linguistic and contextuality when attempting to comprehend the Qur’an.

#### AL-QURAN, ARABIC LANGUAGE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ARABIC

Some researchers have demonstrated concerns regarding mastering Arabic among non-native speakers of Arabic to understand the Qur’an (e.g. Bello, 2015; Hedayet, 2013; F. Rahman, 2009). Believers are not able to understand the meanings of Quranic verses without equipping themselves with the language of the Qur’an, which is Arabic (Rahman, 2009). Hedayet (2013) highlighted concerns that a large number of Muslim who are non-Arabic speakers all over the

world may just recite verses in their daily prayers without understanding their meanings which results in mere recitation.

Several cross-cultural studies have also been conducted to investigate Quranic understanding and its relationship with people around the globe particularly in countries which Arabic is a foreign language to the population. Research in Indonesia, a country with the largest Muslim population, for instance, shows that the Qur'an is embodied in its community through various ways, such as recitation classes for youngsters, Qur'an recitation during prayers or other community activities, memorisation and performing Quranic art recitation competitions, which known as *Majlis Tilawah Qur'an* as well as in their Quranic calligraphy competitions (Mukholik, 2017). This exhibits the close relationship that the Qur'an and Arabic language has with the people. Without understanding the meaning of memorised verses, a believer will not gain good understanding of the Qur'an (Ikhwanuddin & Hashim, 2014). Thus, to ensure accurate understanding of the Qur'an, studies were conducted to identify language learning strategies to improve Arabic language proficiency among Muslim Indonesians, as it is believed that knowledge of the Arabic language is paramount to understand the teachings of the Qur'an (Hilmi, 2013; Wekke et al., 2016).

In Pakistan where a majority of the population are Muslims, Qur'an understanding is easier among its people as approximately 25% words of Urdu were derived from Arabic. Sultana's (2009) experimental study, which applied semantic approach for teaching some verses of the Qur'an to graduate students reported that the approach enhanced their understanding of the Quranic concepts. Equally important is a study conducted to investigate whether the critical reading approach can best be used to assist women to understand the Qur'an in the contemporary world of Pakistan (Loan, 2012). Results showed that by reading their local modernist interpretation book by *Syed Abul Ala Maududi*, the participants' understanding was enhanced compared to reading texts by other world scholars.

Focus was also given by researchers in the European countries in relation to the Qur'an albeit slightly different in terms of interests. In United Kingdom for example, the establishment of Muslim education began in the 1960s to facilitate Muslim community's needs to basic Islamic education. A study by Noh et al., (2013) showed that teaching of Quran to young Muslims was conducted after school as a supplementary education. The classes were conducted in mosques, community centres, local schools and homes or private schools. The focus of the teaching of Qur'an was only on reading basic Arabic letters. This method was criticised as it was believed that students could not understand a single word from the Qur'an, although they completed reading the Qur'an many times.

In the Republic of Ireland, religious education, which includes Qur'an syllabus is under the responsibility of patrons who supervise and determine the syllabus contents in their school. An ethnographic study conducted by Sai, (2017) on how Quran has been taught in primary Muslim schools found that the majority of pupils were not exposed to any understanding of Quranic verses after memorising them. In addition, there was no systematic approach used by teachers although the schools operated under the same patronage. Teachers acted autonomously when teaching pronunciation, memorisation, writing, understanding of meaning, using drilling as one of the techniques.

## THE MALAYSIAN SCENARIO

Malaysia is a developed Muslim-majority country consisting of many different races. The three main races are Malay (including Bumiputera 61.8% from total population 30 million), Chinese (21.4%), and Indian (6.4%). Even though Bahasa Malaysia is the national language, Mandarin, and Tamil are also practised as preservation of each race culture, identity and voices (Ying, Heng & Abdullah, 2015). In terms of religion, the Federal Constitution of the country states

that Islam is the religion of the federation, however other religions can be practised freely (Fernando, 2006). According to the Department of Statistic Malaysia, the total Muslim in Malaysia by percentage is 61.32%, while other religions such as Buddhism is 19.84%, Christianity is 9.24%, Hinduism is 0.63% and others are 8.97% (<https://www.statistics.gov.my/censusatlas/images/ReligionBM.pdf>).

Although English is considered a second language in terms of its importance in Malaysia, Malaysian Muslims have always placed importance on the Arabic language due to their religion. Their children are sent to religious schools and institutions, Islamic classes, and universities to learn this language (Adnan, 2017). Arabic has become part of the formal curriculum. The aim is to give opportunities to the students to enhance their knowledge in all branches of Islamic teaching such as theology, Islamic law, Quran and Hadith interpretation (Al-Bazeli et al., 2014).

Ahmad, Zin and Sakat (2012) carried out a study at a public university in Malaysia. This study was conducted after realising that local students who majored in the field of Islamic studies struggled in two core subjects i.e. Qur'an and Hadith. The focus of the study was to discuss the importance of Arabic language as an instrument in solving the mentioned problem. The results presented confirmed that mastering Arabic grammar is important in understanding Qur'an and other Islamic resources and it was crucial to revise the approach to be undertaken in teaching the Arabic language. Thus, the researchers proposed for a revised curriculum to strengthen the Arabic proficiency among its students. The suggested revision discussed in the study was in the aspect of presentation and practical values of the curriculum. In addition, an empirical study was conducted to identify the relationship between Arabic proficiency with the ability to memorise the Qur'an among students studying at local universities in Malaysia. One of the main constructs that became the focus of the research was "motivation". By focusing on this construct, results showed that more than 50% of the respondents agreed that mastering the Arabic grammar would help them to memorise and understand the Qur'an (Hussin et al., 2016). This became the motivational factor for them to learn Arabic.

In a quite similar scenario, a study was conducted to propose a prototype of a mobile application called "A4Kids" to help make Arabic learning more interactive and interesting for young children. It was carried out to overcome an alarming trend on the ineffectiveness of Arabic language education in Malaysia. The motivation behind this study was because the Arabic language is considered as a bridge to understand Islamic sources such as Qur'an. The prototype was developed for primary school children. Analysis on the feedback received from the children as part of the evaluation process was positive and this confirmed its usability (Neamah et al., 2017).

The reviewed past studies show Malaysian Muslims, who are non-native speakers of Arabic, place importance in learning the Arabic language in order to understand the sacred scripture of the Muslims; the Qur'an.

## METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research design was implemented in this study because it was deemed to be in accordance with the aim of exploring an issue that required insights into the understanding of the Quran. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews, the exploratory research design provided detailed information regarding two matters; firstly is the importance of possessing knowledge of the Arabic language to understand the Qur'an among non-native speakers of Arabic from the perspective of highly proficient speakers of Arabic as a foreign language, and secondly, how do they use the knowledge of Arabic to understand the Quran. One of the benefits of conducting interviews is that interviewees will be able to "speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings" (Berg, 2007), (p. 96). Additionally, using the in-depth semi-

structured interview “allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewee's responses” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), (p.88). In fact, the method of interviewing has been utilised in various fields; from psychology (see Marton & Säljö, 1976) to electronic health (see Holter et al., 2019). Moreover, the two samples here also show that the interview method has withstood the test of time as it has been in use for decades.

### STUDY SETTING

This research was conducted in Malaysia and the participants were based in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan. They are all attached to a public university in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan. The institution, which was established in 2000, is one of the public universities in Malaysia. At present, the university has a total of 756 academic staff which comprised both Malaysians (699 (92.5%)) and other nationalities (57 (7.5%)). They serve the 9 faculties at the university based on their expertise and qualifications.

In terms of knowledge and proficiency in the Arabic language, local academic staff are considered non-native speakers of Arabic. As for the international academic staff, 23 (40%) are native speakers of Arabic while the remaining 34 (60%) are non-native speakers of Arabic. They are from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Nigeria. For the purpose of the current study, those selected as research participants are non-native speakers of Arabic whose areas of expertise are Islamic Studies and Arabic language. Thus, it is important to note that even though the participants are non-native speakers of Arabic, they fulfil the criteria of being considered as experts as can be seen in the next section.

This research is a spin-off from a larger study which focuses on the understanding of Quran for people of diverse groups – from naïve to experts who are non-native speakers. However, this study only looks at the experts and how they use Arabic knowledge in understanding the Quran.

### PARTICIPANTS

The purposive sampling technique was implemented for the participants’ selection due to its relevance to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria are:

- a. experts in Arabic language as seen in their discussion on *Surah Al-Ikhlās* where they were able to explain the understanding of the *surah* through the use of linguistic features like morphology and also were able to relate the *surah* to other verses and *surahs* (more can be found in Rahman S.A, 2017b)
- b. majoring in Islamic studies or Arabic language, and
- c. has given consent.

There were 18 participants invited for this study. From 18 participants, only 5 could fit the criteria of experts as illustrated in ‘a’ (the list above). The other participants were naïve, novice, intermediate and advance. Based on the listed criteria, details regarding the experts are illustrated in table 1.

TABLE 1. Details of the Participants

No	Pseudonym	Qualifications & Areas of Expertise			Teaching Experience
		Degree	Master	Phd	
1	Syazas	<i>Fiqh</i> /Islamic jurisprudence Jordan	<i>Mu'amalat</i> /Islamic Economy Malaysia	<i>Mu'amalat</i> /Islamic Economy Malaysia	1 Year 6 Months
2	Hani	Quran & Sunnah Malaysia	Islamic Revealed Knowledge & Heritage Malaysia	Islamic Education Malaysia	12 Years
3	Musa	Arabic Egypt	Arabic (Grammar) Egypt	Arabic (Grammar) Egypt	14 Years
4	Bayah	Jurisprudence and Its Foundation Jordan	Islamic Studies Malaysia	Quran & Sunnah Malaysia	16 Years
5	Wahid	Tafseer & Quranic Knowledge Egypt	Tafseer & Quranic Knowledge Egypt	Tafseer & Quranic Knowledge Egypt	7 Years

Table 1 shows the five participants (three female and two male participants). They were Muslim Malays and Ph.D. holders majoring either in Islamic studies or Arabic language, graduated either from local universities in Malaysia or universities abroad. As they majored in various disciplines related to the Islamic studies and Arabic language, knowledge of the Arabic language was paramount for them. In addition, they have many years of experience teaching their subjects using the Arabic language. Therefore, despite the participants being non-native speakers of Arabic, with the kind of exposure that they have, their background and also experience, they were highly proficient in the Arabic language. In this paper, they are given pseudonyms for the purpose of ensuring anonymity.

#### DATA COLLECTION

The semi-structured interview method was implemented due to its suitability to reveal the participants' viewpoint. It provided the participants with the opportunity to answer the questions in more depth. Moreover, it allowed for further questions to be asked, depending on the responses given by the participants.

An interview protocol was developed consisting of two major components: a) the researchers' introduction to the participants and (b) the questions on two areas. The protocol under the first component consisted of establishing rapport, creating an adequate environment, and eliciting reflection and comments from the participants. Two of the questions are 'How much emphasis does your family put on Quran reading in your daily life?' and 'Who or what has encouraged you to understand the Quran?'

Meanwhile, the protocol under the second component consists of questions on the importance of Arabic in understanding the Quran and also how they understand the Quran based on their knowledge of Arabic. This is done via their discussion on the selected *surah* and the verses from the Quran. However, it is essential to highlight that the arrangement of the *surah* and verses in the interview protocol was done according to familiarisation and their location in the Quran. *Surah Al-Ikhlās* was used first as it is the most familiar and frequently cited in prayers. It is then followed by selected ayahs in *Ali Imran*, *Al-Mulk* and then *At-Toriq*. They were arranged according to their location in the Quran, for example, *Ali Imran* is earlier than *Al-Mulk*. Refer to Appendix A for the *surah* and verses. Following that, the quality of the interview protocol was refined by consulting two experts involved in the study of the Holy

Qur'an, applied linguistics as well as in the qualitative approach. The experts have also employed interviews for feedback and guidance. With this, an improvement and refinement in the interview were made especially in the aspect of the quality and clarity of its questions.

The interviews were conducted from March to April 2016. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia with a given code: USIM/JKEP/ 2019-46. Consent from the participants was obtained verbally and in writing after they were given an explanation of the purposes, risks, and benefits of the study (refer to Appendix B for the consent letter). The participants were also informed that they could withdraw anytime.

## THE INTERVIEWS

The interview process, as elucidated earlier, began with the construction of the interview protocol. Then the researchers approached the participants to set interview dates. For each interview, the participant signed the consent form and their interview was recorded. The audio was then transcribed in word document to be used in the ATLAS.ti software for data management. Once transcribed, the transcription was shown to the participant for validation. This process is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

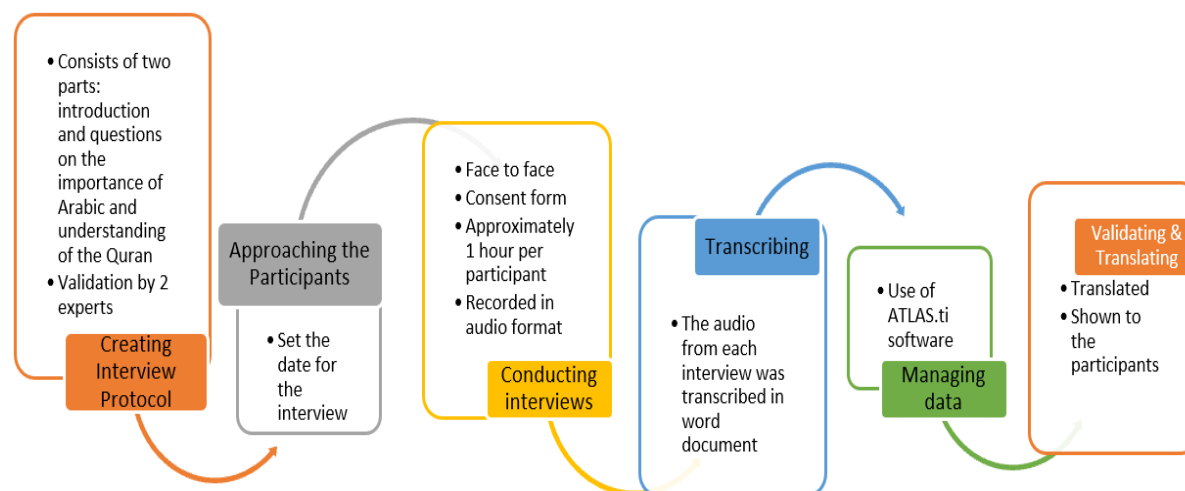


FIGURE 1. The Interview Process

Figure 1 provides the procedure and details of the interviews. Overall, five interviews were conducted with the participants, with each taking approximately one-hour. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio recorded, and saved in the audio format. The language used for the interviews was Malay, the native/first language of both the researchers and the participants. It is important for the chosen language to be a language which both parties understand and comfortable with in order to avoid issues of miscommunication or misinterpretation. However, it was worthy to highlight that a few of the participants used Arabic when elaborating on their answers.

All the audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes. All the related Malay versions of the transcriptions were translated into English by two translators, namely an independent translator and one of the researchers. The translation was mostly made on general ideas rather than word per word. The translated versions of the data for all the interviews of both translators were then compared. When there was any major discrepancy in the translations occurred, the Arabic version was used. One example for this is 'Qolbun'; one translated it as 'heart' while another as 'feeling'. Thus, the Arabic word was used instead, in order for the word to retain its connotation and not to lose any nuances. This



was followed by a consultation with the participants in order to confirm as well as validate the contents of both the original transcriptions and the translated versions.

### DATA ANALYSIS

The collected interview data were analysed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical method for identifying, analysing, and reporting the patterns (themes) within collected data. The researchers referred to Merriam's (2009) two-step analysis. In the first step, the researchers conducted open coding where phrases and statements from the transcripts that indicate the interviewees' explanation of their understanding of the *surah* and the verses were coded generally or at times in-vivo. In-vivo refers to coding using the interviewees' spoken words. Figure 2 below illuminates the open coding codes.

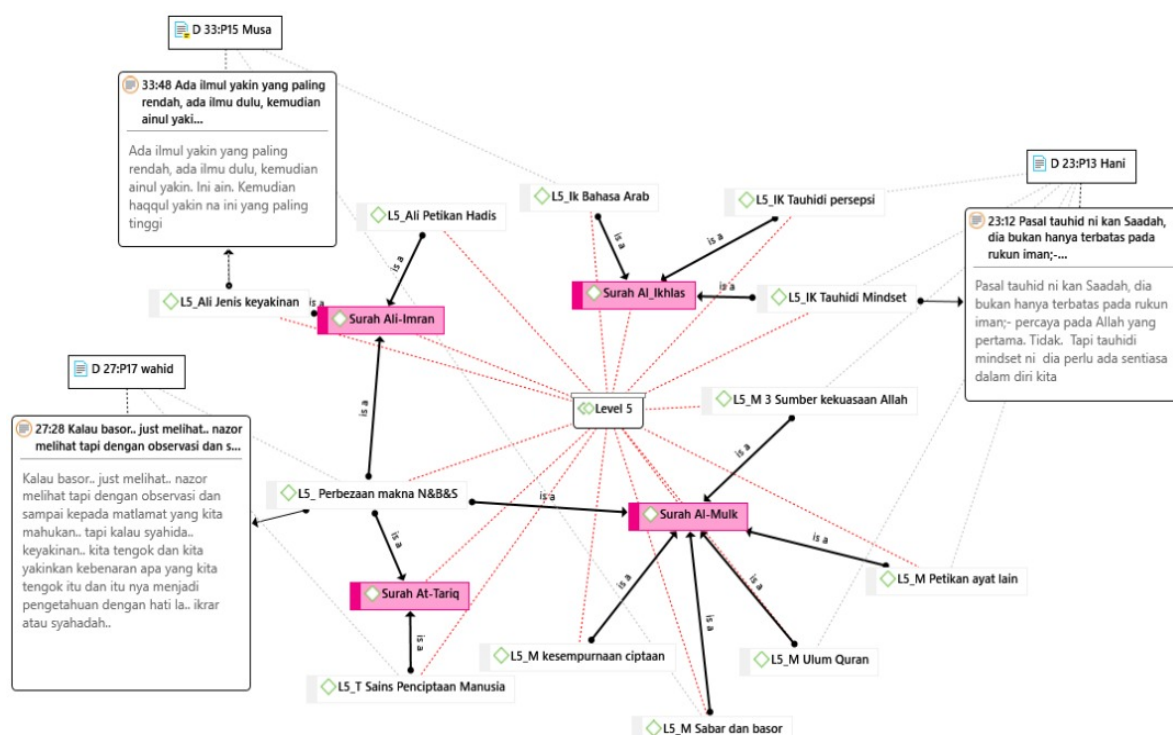


FIGURE 2. Open Coding Codes on ATLAS.ti Output

Figure 2 is an interface from ATLAS.ti's output for open coding on the experts' transcripts. Level 5 indicates the experts' level. The open coding level was descriptive. Thus, the codes were the descriptions of how the participants elaborated their understanding of the *surah* and verses. Figure 2 also shows a few in-vivo coding like 23:12, 27:28 and 33:48.

The next step was to do analytical coding where these codes including in-vivo codes were put into groups, concepts or themes which were more abstract. However, not all codes can belong to a theme. A theme stands when there are 2 or more codes that share the same concept. An example for this is for the theme of '*Tadabbur*' which generally means reflection (this is further explained in the result and discussion section). The codes that fall under '*Tadabbur*' are '*petikan ayat lain*' (an excerpt from another verse) and '*petikan hadis*' (an excerpt from the hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon Him)). Both codes share the concept of how the participants have understood the *surah* and verses in the interview by reflecting and connecting to other verse and hadith. Consensus on the themes and codes under the themes was gained through discussion among the researchers.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This section intends to provide answers to the two research questions. Explanations together with evidence from data sets will also be included to provide support.

### **RQ1: How important is Arabic language in comprehending the Qur'an?**

#### **ARABIC LANGUAGE IS NEEDED IN UNDERSTANDING THE QURAN**

This study explores the importance of having Arabic language to understand the Qur'an among Malay Muslims who are non-native speakers of Arabic. To understand the issue better, data gathered from the interview sessions with the participants were transcribed and thematically analysed. Findings from the interviews concurred with those obtained from past studies, where it is imperative for Muslims to possess the knowledge of the Arabic language in order to understand the contents of/verses of the Qur'an (e.g. Ahmad et al., 2012; Alkhateeb, 2014; Bello, 2015; Hedayet, 2013; Musharraf, 2015; Sai, 2017b). Having the knowledge of the Arabic language enables a person to read and understand the contents of the Qur'an without having to use any tools (e.g. translated versions of the Qur'an) to facilitate his understanding. As emphasised by Ahmad et al., (2012), without the knowledge of the Arabic language, an individual will have to constantly refer to the translated versions of the Qur'an or Quranic commentaries or also known as Tafseer books.

Evidence regarding the importance of having Arabic language to understand the Qur'an could be observed in the interviews conducted. Specifically, in the interview conducted with Bayah regarding her understanding of the Qur'an, she mentioned that she was able to understand the contents based on what she read without having to refer to the translated version of the Qur'an or Qur'anic commentaries. As shown in Example 1, having Arabic language knowledge allowed her to understand the Qur'an. She quipped:

Example 1:

*"I don't read the translated version of the Qur'an because I understand the Qur'an in its original language, which is Arabic."*

However, it was interesting to note that another interviewee, Wahid, highlighted that basic mastery of Arabic only allows one to communicate in the language. To understand the Qur'an, the mastery of Arabic needs to be at an advanced level, as mentioned by Wahid in Example 2 below:

Example 2:

*"First is the mastery of the Arabic language, where you need to master the basics of Arabic. However, to understand the Qur'an, your Arabic language knowledge must be at an advanced level. The basic mastery will enable you to communicate only. It will not help you understand the Qur'an. You need to know the grammar, the balaghah to understand the Qur'an"*

Examples 1 and 2 illustrated the importance of possessing knowledge of Arabic in order to understand the verses of the Qur'an, and these findings concurred with those from previous research (e.g. Bello, 2015; Hedayet, 2013; Sai, 2017). However, it can be assumed that having basic mastery of Arabic only enables one to communicate as shown in Example 2. To understand the Qur'an, one's mastery and knowledge level of the Arabic language need to be at an advanced level. This includes knowledge of linguistic features of Arabic (e.g. phonetic, morphology, grammar, and rhetoric devices).

Examples taken from the interview clearly show that having Arabic language is important in comprehending the Qur'an. It can be concluded that one's knowledge of the Arabic language does play a role for a better understanding and to appreciate the Quran among Malay Muslims who are non-native speakers of Arabic. However, an interesting comment was made by Wahid who highlighted that a believer should not wait to become an expert in Arabic to learn the Qur'an as seen in Example 3 below. The sacred scripture has been translated into many languages to enable its believers to learn. These translated Qur'an can be used to learn the teachings and messages from the Qur'an and can be further supported by using Qur'anic commentaries.

Example 3:

*Personally, I feel that if a person wants to learn the Qur'an, it is not compulsory for him to learn advanced Arabic. In fact, he doesn't even have to learn the basic Arabic. He can learn using the translated versions of the Qur'an, refer to Qur'anic commentaries....my concern is with the belief that you need to know Arabic then only you can learn the Qur'an, people may end up not learning the Qur'an at all, thinking that they need Arabic to do so...but knowing Arabic does make a difference, you can understand a little here and there.*

To conclude, even though findings from the interviews regarding the importance of Arabic language to comprehend the Qur'an are of mixed views, the main conclusion drawn is that knowledge of the Arabic language is important and can assist a person to comprehend the contents of the Qur'an.

## **RQ2: How do the experts comprehend the Qur'an?**

The participants in this study were considered very knowledgeable in the Arabic language. This is based on the participants characteristics as presented in Table 1. Thus, when asked how they comprehend the teachings and messages found in the Qur'an, three major themes emerged - the translation approach, the lexical approach, and the linguistics approach. The three approaches used by these experts to comprehend the Qur'an will be discussed in the following section.

### **THEME 1 – TRANSLATION APPROACH**

A non-native speaker of Arabic may use the translation approach to comprehend the Qur'an. Translation in this study means how the person understands Arabic and can translate the Qur'anic verses into his mother tongue. Thus, his understanding of the Qur'an is based on the Qur'anic verses which he translates which is literal understanding in nature. Generally, literal understanding of the Qur'an is limited to what the person can translate from Arabic to his first language due to his basic knowledge of Arabic. He can provide explanations of the text based on what he has translated. Therefore, an understanding of the Qur'an on the literal level is rather simple and straightforward.

The translation approach used by one of the participants can be observed in Example 4, when one interviewee, Syaza, explained what she understood from *Surah Al-Ikhlās*. Her explanation was the direct translation of the verses. For instance, the first verse of *Surah Al-Ikhlās* is "*Qul huwallāhu ahad*", which would be directly translated into "He is Allah, (the) One" (Al-Hilali & Khan, 2009), (p.858). In her explanation, she stated that "Allah is one", which was a direct translation from Arabic to Malay. She further explained the concept of Oneness by highlighting that Allah does not have children.

Example 4:

*“This surah stated about, err emphasised on Allah the Absolute, Allah is One and Only. He neither begets nor is born, emm... it means that the surah states about the Absoluteness of Allah the One and Only, and none is likened to Him.”*

Syaza applied her knowledge of the Arabic language to translate the verses. The translation was direct and literal, from Arabic to Malay. Her explanation regarding the concept of Oneness of Allah was also the direct translation of the *surah*. Additionally, no additional explanation was provided regarding the messages conveyed through the verses. With this, it could be seen that by possessing basic knowledge of Arabic, Syaza used the translation approach to comprehend the Qur’anic verses. She translated the Arabic Qur’anic verses into Malay and demonstrated literal understanding of the verses.

When asked to explain *Surah Al Mulk*, Syaza used a similar approach, which is the translation approach. She used her knowledge of Arabic to translate the Arabic version of the verse to Malay and demonstrated her understanding of the verse which was literal understanding. For example, the third verse from *Surah Al Mulk* when directly translated would be “[And] who created seven heavens in layers. You do not see in the creation of the Most Merciful any inconsistency. So, return [your] vision [to the sky]; do you see any breaks?”. In her explanation, she explained that the verse was about the sky and nature as seen in Example 5. She quipped:

Example 5:

*It is about the sky or nature. Here Allah says the creation of the sky, it has seven layers. Something we cannot achieve, beyond us, those things are layered. Seven layers.*

Based on an analysis of information from Qur’ancorpus.com conducted by Dukes (Zimmerman, 1934), it was found that there are approximately 77,430 number of words in the Qur’an. From the overall number, 5,155 words are used at least once or more in the Qur’an. Therefore, the theory is that “if non-native Arabic speakers can add these 5,155 words to their personal vocabulary, they would be able to understand the literal meaning of the Qur’an” (Raja-Yusof et al., 2013, p.75). Thus, this might explain the literal understanding of the Qur’an displayed by Syaza. Essentially, a person who possesses the basic knowledge of Arabic may be able to understand Qur’anic verses due to his ability to directly translate the verses from Arabic to his first language.

## THEME 2: LEXICAL APPROACH

Another approach used by non-native speakers of Arabic to comprehend the Qur’an is using the lexical approach. The lexical approach in this discussion is when the non-native speaker of Arabic uses the lexical items in the verses to elaborate the verses. He can connect lexical items found in the *surah* and further elaborate its meanings.

In the interviews, the ability to connect lexical items and provide elaboration can be seen in Example 6, where an interviewee, Bayah, explained the meaning of the text’s verses in *Surah Al-Ikhlās*. The direct translation of the second verse of *Surah Al-Ikhlās*, “*Allahu samad*”, is “Allah - the Self-Sufficient Master, whom all creatures need (He neither eats nor drinks)” (Al-Hilali & Khan, 2009), (p.858). The verse conveys that Allah is perfect and He is “the one Who everybody depends on, but the one who doesn’t depend on anyone. It also indicates that Allah is unlike His creation”(Ibn Kathir, 2006).

With her advanced knowledge of Arabic, from the verses, Bayah understood the attributes of perfection possessed by Allah which are unlike His creations, but she did not just provide a direct translation by saying that ‘Allah does not eat or drink’. Instead, using the

lexical approach, she provided a kind of synonymous explanation. To illustrate, instead of repeating that Allah is ‘the Self-Sufficient Master’, Bayah used the word ‘All Powerful’, followed by an explanation that He can and will give anything His servants ask for. The word ‘All Powerful’ explains the attribute of perfection which Allah possesses. Following that, she made a comparison between what Allah can do and what man can do by highlighting that man is not able to fulfil requests from others all the time, unlike Allah. She mentioned:

Example 6:

*“... Allahu samad. The nature of Allah is indeed where we ask, He gives. Al-Samad means that He is All Powerful, where he can give what we ask. It means that if we ask from people, it doesn't mean that they are able to give.”*

She further elaborated the same verse highlighting that Allah could provide anything His believers ask from Him. This proves that it is Allah who a believer should depend on, the ultimate provider, and not others. Her ability to elaborate and provide examples illustrated her advanced mastery of Arabic. She used the lexical approach to provide explanation and elaboration as seen in Example 7:

Example 7:

*“But with Allah, He provides us with the nature to ask, hence, He will give. Whatever that we seek from Allah, He will give. If we ask anything from the smallest things to the greatest extent, Allah, the All Mighty, is able to provide.”*

Overall, in order to understand the teachings of the Qur’an and to reflect upon them, advanced mastery and knowledge of the Arabic language are essential (Abidin et al., 2017). This can be seen from Bayah’s answers, where it was proven that her understanding of the Qur’an was not limited at the literal level only. Instead, with her advanced knowledge and mastery of Arabic, she was able to better comprehend the verses and provided elaboration on each of them.

### THEME 3: LINGUISTIC APPROACH

The linguistic approach used by the participants in this study to comprehend the Qur’an refers to using linguistic features of Arabic such as phonetic, morphology, grammar, and rhetoric devices to elaborate the verses and correlate with its theme. With this, comes the ability to *Tadabbur*. *Tadabbur* is a word originating from the Arabic language (Manaf et al., 2017), which means “to observe and to reflect”. The definition of *tadabbur* is derived from Imam Ibn Kathir (m.774H). Manaf et al., (2017) state that “*tadabbur* of Qur’an means understanding the meaning of Quranic verses, and contemplating the signs in it, what makes the meanings of Quran perfect, finding the signs and reminders behind the apparent verses, the heart is touched by following all of Allah’s commands and injunctions, obeying His commands, as well as taking moral lessons (ibrah) from it” (p. 103). Through *tadabbur* or reflection and with knowledge of the Arabic language, a believer will be able to understand the literal meaning of the Qur’anic verses. More importantly, he can reflect on the Qur’anic teachings and relates the teachings to himself, practise them as well as connect with new ideas or concepts.

With extensive Arabic language knowledge, a person does not require additional translation tools to aid him to understand the contents and teachings of the Qur’an. In fact, he can understand and relate the teachings of the Qur’an while adhering to the rules and regulations stipulated in the Qur’an. He also can impart the messages conveyed in the Qur’an, besides merging the knowledge he acquires from other fields of study with the contents of the

Qur'an. These characteristics can be illustrated in the excerpt of an answer from Bayah in Example 8:

Example 8:

*“Surah al-Ikhlās is the core of aqidah. It is where we can witness the beginning of tawheed (the concept of Oneness of Allah). Qul huallāhu ahad. From the linguistic angle, ‘huwa’ refers to Allah. The ta’kid (affirmation) is evident. Ahadun. The mubtada’ khabar meaning. To deny, there is none other than Illāh, the One and Only.”*

In Example 8, it could be observed that Bayah applied her linguistic knowledge to illustrate the connections between the words used and the teachings found in the verses. Using her advanced knowledge of the Arabic language, Bayah’s explanation was not restricted to the literal translation or reflection of the verses alone. Instead, she was able to explain from the linguistic angle of the Arabic language. Her ability for this detailed explanation was attributed to her advanced knowledge level of Arabic and her understanding of how the language was used to present specific lessons.

The relationship between advanced knowledge of Arabic and understanding of Qur’anic verses can also be observed in Example 9. This is an excerpt from an interview with an interviewee named Musa, who mentioned:

Example 9:

*“...When we learn Arabic, Lam Yalid, [referring to verse لم يلد]... Lam is harfu jazmi ya dullu alan nafiyyun wa qalbun [Referring to Arabic grammatical rule for particle Lam (لم) حرف جزم (لم) نفي وقلب, which means a particle denotes semantically a refutation and to change something]. It is a particle that jazam fi’el muthori [which brings a grammatical change to the Arabic present verb-الفعل المضارع] and it means nafiyyun [refutation-نفي]. In the Wa qalbun [to change] phrase, qalbun [participant repeats the same word to elaborate its meaning] means to change. Qalbun [participant keeps stressing the same word for the second time] means to switch or change or to be made inconsistent, right? That is Qalbun. Innama summiya Qoblu ditaqollubih [refers to literal meaning of word Qalbun- قلب, which means to change and to switch]... [Qalbun also literally means “heart”] It is called the heart as the heart can be inconsistent. Hence, this is what the harfun nafi wajazmin wa qolbin” means...*

The third verse of Surah Al-Ikhlās “*lam yalid wa lam yulad*” means “He begets not, nor was He begotten” (Al-Hilali & Khan, 2008, p.858). Based on Example 9, with Musa’s advanced mastery of the Arabic language, he was able to make delicate and unique connections between what was found in the verses. This is seen in Example 9. The verse “*lam yalid*” which combines the particle *Lam* and the verb *yalid*, is an active present verb. The verse means that Allah does not give birth. The verse “*lam yulad*” is different from the first verse. It means that even in the future Allah will not give birth. Musa repeatedly referred to the verses in his explanation. Specifically, instead of limiting himself into providing translations of the verses alone, Musa provided further explanation of the particle “*Lam*”, highlighted the two functions of the particle “*Lam*” (i.e. grammatical function and semantic function) and showed how the particle “*Lam*” functioned grammatically as well as semantically in the verse.

The Holy Qur’an descended and was revealed in the Arabic language. Arabic language, like many other languages in the world, is a language that is unique. For example, a word can be expressed in many different words. In other words, it has many synonyms. To illustrate, the word *basara* (بصر) which means eyesight or the ability to see has three synonyms which are *ra’a* (رأى), *nazara* (نظر), and *syahida* (شهد). Another unique characteristic of the Arabic language is that a word in Arabic can hold multiple meanings. As an example, the word al-‘ain

(العين) which three meanings: it can mean either an agent who spies on others, a spring where water flows out from the ground or a leader for a community . Additionally, there is also a group of words in Arabic that hold multiple meanings and concurrently have multiple contradictory meanings (Al-omari & Abu-Melhim, 2014; Obeidat & Abu-Melhim, 2017). To illustrate this feature, the following is taken as an example. *Raghība* (رغب) which means to like or to hate something where the meaning will be identified with the presence of another preposition which will determine the meaning of the word. Thus, *raghība bi* (رغب ب) means to like something while *raghība ‘an* (رغب عن) means to hate. Due to these complex yet unique attributes of the Arabic language, advanced knowledge of Arabic is paramount in order to understand the teachings of this sacred scripture.

Additionally, with advanced knowledge of Arabic in the aspect of its grammar, morphology, syntax, rhetoric, and the unique sentence structures, a believer will be able to understand both the literal meaning of the Qur’an and the underlying message behind it. In this study, the relationship between advanced knowledge of the Arabic language and the ability to understand the Qur’an contextually was emphasised by Wahid in Example 10.

Example 10:

*“Basic Arabic knowledge doesn’t help us understand the Quran... but if we have advanced knowledge...of Arabic...know the grammar, know the rhetoric, balaghah... know the contents, what is that...er...disciplines of knowledge like rhetorical knowledge...that can help us easily understand the Qur’an... in-depth learning of Arabic is very much encouraged.”*

Based on Wahid’s explanation in Example 10, the knowledge of *balaghah* is an integral component which needs to be mastered in order to understand the Qur’an. The term *balaghah* refers to ‘eloquence’ or ‘stylistics’, and it is “connected with the study of the effective use of language and the pragmatic analysis of linguistic communication” (Wahid, 2017), (p.3). It is specially developed to enable a person to gain in-depth knowledge of the Arabic language and appreciate the beauty of the language. As highlighted by (Suhane et al., 2015), “the knowledge of *balaghah* will guide a reader to recognise the style of the Qur’anic language, to identify the different ways messages in the Qur’an are conveyed, and to distinguish the Qur’anic style from the style of Arabic poetry” (p.753).

Overall, it could be seen from the interviews that it is vital for non-native speakers of Arabic to possess knowledge of the Arabic language to understand the Qur’an. In addition, the approaches that non-native speakers of Arabic employ to comprehend the Qur’an vary. As exhibited in the interview excerpts, to understand, reflect and appreciate the teachings and messages of the Qur’an, advanced knowledge of the Arabic language is very much required.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, knowledge of the Arabic language is a key element to understand the Holy Qur’an which was revealed in the Arabic language. In this study, how knowledge of the Arabic language influences Qur’anic understanding among non-native speakers of Arabic was investigated. The results obtained were in parallel with those from past studies in which it is imperative for Muslims who are non-native speakers of Arabic to possess knowledge of Arabic for full understanding of Qur’anic teachings (Mustapha et al., 2013; Zailani et al., 2015). A believer’s inability to comprehend the contents of the Qur’an due to language barrier would lead him to depend on the translated version of the Qur’an. The issue found in the translated versions of the Qur’an is that they often do not convey the same meaning as the original Holy text (Afsar & Azmat, 2012; Musharraf, 2015; Ngo, 2011; Siddiek, 2017). Besides, in most translated versions, especially English, examples from past studies showed that “insufficient

regard to the context seriously mars understanding and results in a misrepresentation of the Qur'an's message" (Haleem, 2018, p. 47). Furthermore, as mentioned by Siddiek (2017), one of the issues pertaining to doing a direct translation of the Qur'anic verses is related to the issue of semantic ambiguity. This issue would occur especially when the verses are complicated in terms of structures and concepts. For this reason, it is believed that in order to go beyond the literal understanding of the Qur'an, it is important for a believer to acquire more than only Arabic words in his vocabulary. This shows how important an advanced mastery of the Arabic language is in this context. Even those with advanced mastery of the Arabic language comprehend the Qur'an in different ways. However, it is clear that knowledge in the Arabic language is paramount to comprehend the contents of the Qur'an.

Arabic, like many other languages in the world, is a medium of communication. It has many dialectal varieties. The variety which is mostly used in formal situations is Classical Arabic, which is also the language of the Qur'an (Bello, 2015) and the scripture used by Muslims. However, the type of Arabic language usually taught in schools and other educational institutions particularly for non-native speakers of Arabic is known as the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). This type of Arabic language only enables its learners (whom the majority are non-native speakers of Arabic) to communicate in Arabic. To a certain extent, the modern Arabic can also be applied to translate the Qur'anic verses to one's native language. However, in order to understand the teachings and messages of the Holy Qur'an, knowledge of Classical Arabic is paramount due to the fact that it is the language in which the Qur'an descended with and was revealed to the Muslims. Therefore, as a pedagogical implication, teaching and learning Classical Arabic especially with regards to vocabulary, grammatical rules, rhetorical elements, among others are important to interpret and understand the teachings of the Qur'an. This shows that like in many fields of study, language needs to be taught for specific purposes and in this case, Qur'anic/Classical Arabic with its specific elements in order to understand the contents and teachings of the Holy Qur'an.

Future studies can focus on how those with diverse background understand the Qur'an. Equally important is research on how those with limited or zero knowledge of Arabic comprehend the teachings of the Qur'an. Findings from these studies can be used to design suitable syllabuses to address their respective levels and needs.

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## APPENDIX A

### SURAH AND VERSES IN INTERVIEW SESSIONS

Arrangement of the Surah and Verses.

1. One surah - Surah Al-Ikhlās (112:1-4)  
قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ ۝ ۱ اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ ۝ ۲ لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ ۝ ۳ وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ ۝ ٤
2. Vision and Sight verses in Surah Ali-Imrān verse 18 (3:18)  
شَهِدَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُو الْعِلْمِ قَانِمًا بِالْقِسْطِ ۗ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ۝ ١٨
3. Vision and Sight verses in Surah Al-Mulk verse 3 (67:3)  
الَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ طِبَاقًا مَّا تَرَى فِي خَلْقِ الرَّحْمَنِ مِن تَفَوُّتٍ فَارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ هَلْ تَرَى مِن فُطُورٍ ۝ ٣
4. Vision and Sight verses in Surah At-Tariq verse 5 (86:5)  
(فَلْيَنْظُرِ الْإِنْسَانُ مِمَّ خُلِقَ ۝ ٥)

## APPENDIX B

### CONSENT LETTER



### Consent Form for Audio

I hereby agree to give permission to [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] to record the interview. I understand that this audio interview will be used for research purposes only. Researcher can contact me if she needs to clarify any matters regarding this research. I have been briefed that I can withdraw anytime, and my name will not be revealed in any publication.

Participant's Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Contact. No : \_\_\_\_\_  
E-mail : \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name \_\_\_\_\_

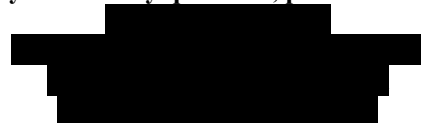
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If you have any questions, please contact:



### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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