**Reading Literacy in Islamic Countries: Evidence from PISA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Most of moslem countries nowadays are still facing a low reading literacy rate of their population inspite of the fact that the first verse revealed in the Quran speaks of the importance of reading in human life. This paper is aimed at portraying reading literacy in the Moslem world and identifying factors influencing this literacy attainment based on PISA studies. The study uses descriptive-comparative analysis to depict the students’ reading performance of ten Moslem countries participating in PISA. The study shows that most of Moslem countries lag behind the average of OECD countries. Most of the students were not able to demonstrate the ability of the most fundamental knowledge and skills for 21th century. Because reading literacy is the basis for self-development, the Moslem worlds face tremendous challenge that less than one percent of students achieve higher literacy rate; those are the ones who will live on in a global society; the rests were at the lowest level who shall show solemn setbacks in applying this ability to extend their knowledge and skills. The factors influencing this ability are situated in the national and community context that shape home, classroom, and school activities in reading. This situation then affects the instruction and experiences in student’s reading. The result of this study contributes to the improvement of education systems among the participating countries. This is also a warning that the Moslem worlds have identical educational problems to prepare the next Moslem generation for a better live facing the challenge of globalization.*

**Keywords**: reading literacy, Moslem worlds, PISA

**INTRODUCTION**

In spite of the fact that in its golden ages Islam occupied nearly one-third of the planet and the Moslem authority at that time led the world in terms of literary tradition, the Moslem today in fact faces serious and severe problems. The unremitting uprisings and social-political instability in the Far-East Moslem countries are shocking and unbelievable. The higher illiteracy index that causes poverty and powerlessness in South Asian Moslem countries is a reality that is inevitable because of fast growing number of population. Meanwhile, being the largest Moslem majority country – the fourth largest population in the world and the third largest democracy in the world, Indonesia is almost akin with other Islamic countries in the sense that the problems related to religiosity and social responsibility, education, health, and prosperity are left unsolved.

The Human Development Index of most Moslem states as an indicator of the success of economic development, health, and education, in the last decade also did not show an increase – even some are declined in comparison with other nations. The indices that rank a hundred more have signaled that the nation's quality is inversely proportional to the quantity. In addition, the survey on national competitiveness also shows that most of Moslem nations will not be able to compete and side by side with other western nations. Various studies on education and literacy levels of our students, also suggests that the future of the Moslem nation will not change much because of the level of education and low literacy (Anto, 2009: 69-70).

Another striking occurrence is the result of a research by Rehman and Askari entitled *How Islamic are Islamic Countries?* (2010: 19-20) who reveal that Moslem countries do not necessarily live in accordance with Islamic precepts wholeheartedly in everyday life. Using the principles of ideal indicators contained in the teachings of Islam practiced in the society, the first rank to 37th of these countries were occupied by the non-Moslems – the highest ‘Islamic country’ is New Zealand then followed by Luxembourg, Ireland, Iceland, and Finland. This means that the non-Moslem countries are 'more Islamic' than Moslems in carrying out the principles of Islam in daily life. Malaysia (ranked 38th in the world) was ranked first in a group of Moslem majority countries, followed by Kuwait (world ranking 48), Bahrain (rank 64), Brunei (65), and the United Emirate Arab (66). Indonesia ranked 140 (out of 208 countries surveyed) which was under Uganda, Gabon, Jordan, Tunisia, Guyana, Mozambique, Oman, Suriname, Turkey, Maldives, and even under Kazakhstan, Albania, and Kyrgyzstan that in some international education studies, they are always in the bottom lines.

This religiosity rate is factually in line with the Corruption Perception Index issued by Transparency International (https://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/), that in 2013 the countries of New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Singapore posed the highest indices (9.2-9.5), meaning that they are relatively clean of corruption, while Indonesia was ranked 100 with an index of 3.0 – similar with other Moslem majority countries, which again indicate that corruption or corrupted mentality is still prevalent. As a result, the majority of Moslems in these countries are still tolerating corruption and other financial crimes because they do not carry out the principles of the Islamic religion in living an ideal life.

However, the root of the problems lies in the quality of the education system among the Moslem countries. The results of PISA (*Programme for International Student Assessment*) launched by the OECD ([*www.pisa.oecd.org*](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)) have shown significant differences between OECD countries and developing countries of the Moslem world. Ten out of 65 countries participated in the study are Moslem-majority countries. The study which focuses on young people’s ability to use their knowledge and skills (in reading, mathematics, and science) to meet real-life challenges has successfully portrayed the discrepancy among countries in preparing the future of their students. This study not only highlights differences in the students’ performance patterns but also identifies features common to high-performing students, schools and education systems, which can be done by linking data on learning outcomes with data on student characteristics and other key factors that shape learning in and outside of school. That is why this study is undoubtedly considered as ‘a mirror for future’.

PISA is aimed at examining periodically the ability of students age 15 years (Grade 9 Junior and/or Grade 10 Senior High School) in reading, mathematics, and scientific literacy within a common internationally agreed framework. This study has been conducted several times in 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2009. As in PISA 2000, *reading literacy* is the focus of the PISA 2009 study, but the reading framework has been updated and now also includes the assessment of reading of electronic texts.

The main reasons for countries to participate in international assessments, following ex-President IEA Tjeerd Plomp (1999), are to get description/ mirror functions, benchmarking, monitoring of quality of education, understanding observed differences, and cross-national research of the students achievement.

The decision to participate in international assessments was usually made by the National Education Research and Development Body and was implemented by the Center of National Education Assessment, the Ministry of Education and Culture. Experts from higher institutions were involved in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the program.

The PISA assessment provides three main types of outcomes. *Firstly*, basic indicators that provide a baseline profile of students’ reading literacy, i.e., the capacity to understand, use, reflect on and engage with written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society. *Secondly*, contextual indicators that display the relationship of their reading skills to important demographic, social, economic and educational variables. *Thirdly*, indicators on trends that emerge from the on-going nature of the data collection and that show changes in outcome levels and distributions, and in relationships between student-level and school-level background variables and outcomes (Milena, 2016).

The data collected in PISA study comprises of three parts, i.e, the students’ knowledge, students’ background, and school background. The data on knowledge aspects includes reading literacy, mathematical literacy, and scientific literacy. PISA defines reading literacy as “understanding, using, and reflecting on written texts in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (OECD, 2010).

Furthermore, comparative international assessments can extend and enrich the national picture by providing a larger context within which to interpret national performance. They can show what is possible in education, in terms of the quality of educational outcomes as well as in terms of equity in the distribution of learning opportunities. They can support setting policy targets by establishing measurable goals achieved by other systems and help to build trajectories for reform. They can also help countries work out their relative strengths and weaknesses and monitor progress (OECD, 2010).

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literacy is defined in many different ways. Some definitions focus on the skills needed by individuals for work, education, social interaction and negotiation of everyday living. Others have a more social focus, and include the literacies for specific contexts and those which empower particular communities enabling them to challenge the status quo. How literacy is defined shapes the kinds of policies developed and the teaching/learning practices adopted (Schugar & Dreher, 2017; Lonsdale & McCurry, 2004). However, in the last two centuries, the notion of literacy has developed. The meaning of literacy as the ability to read and write is still imperative, although it has broadened its meaning include digital technology that has increasingly attracted attention contributed to media literacy in family lives and schools (Cappello, 2017).

Some researchers state that literacy has no single or universal definition and that its meaning has changed over time from an elementary ‘decoding’ of written information to a range of more complex and diverse skills and understandings. The United Nations clearly reflects this shift in thinking. In the 1950s the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared a person to be functionally literate “when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group” (Baker & Street in Lonsdale, & McCurry, 2004: 1). However, fifty year later, at the official launch of the United Nations Literacy Decade 2003–2012, the United Nations spokesperson acknowledged that the campaign was based on a new definition of literacy to include the recognition of multiple literacies that are diverse, having many dimensions, and are learned in different ways (Lonsdale, & McCurry, 2004).

In fact the challenge of global life in this century has compelled our students to obtain basic skills in reading, mathematics and science as the minimum basic skills so that they can survive in the life of an increasingly complex and competitive world. In the history of mankind, the ability of this basic truth has been taught since the first century through what is called the Artes Liberales curriculum which stated that human capacity can only be developed proportionally if language, mathematics, and science are administered and educated in an integrated way. In the 5th century, Martianus Capella added the contents of this curriculum with rhetoric, music, and astronomy.

Twenty centuries later, these basic skills are still relevant and continuously developed. In the Conference 2000, Professor Michael Barber of Flinders University, says that *”…In the 21st century, world class standards will demand that everyone is highly literate, highly numerate, well-informed, capable of learning constantly, and confident and able to play their part as a citizen of a democratic society…”* The world community then sets a standard of assessment to determine the level of literacy in language, particularly reading literacy, mathematics, and science. The world's three major studies, the PIRLS, PISA, and TIMSS, are internationally renowned as benchmarking instruments of the quality of world’s basic education today. In spite of the fact that they are not the only reference in the assessment of quality of education, many countries have used the results of this study as the bases for planning the development of education in their country.

Kern (2000: 3-7) argues that literacy is narrowly defined as the ability to read and write that are also associated with habituation in reading and appreciating works of literature. However, it is actually related to thinking skills and lifelong learning to survive in the social and cultural environment. Moreover, Kern says that literacy can be viewed from three perspectives, namely from the viewpoint of linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural. In the context of language education, he said that “… Literacy is the use of socially, historically, and culturally situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships.”

Accordingly, this capability is divided into three basic skills. First, the ability to read a text (or *prose literacy*), for example, the ability to understand different opinions in an editorial, appreciate the message in a short story, or comprehend instruction in electronic goods manual; second, the ability to read a document (*document literacy*), for example, the ability to fill out registration forms, job application forms, or income and taxation forms, or to understand important documents in their daily work; and third, the ability to perform calculations by using the math symbol (*quantitative literacy)*, for example, the ability to pay electricity bills, calculate the payment or deposit their money or credit cards, or estimate bank interests (Schugar & Dreher, 2017).

According to Mullis et.al. (2009), the determinant factors influencing the student’s reading achievement and their behaviors and attitudes are the national and community contexts which influence home, classroom, and school activities in reading. The whole situation will then affect the instruction and experiences in student’s reading. The picture below portrays the factors influencing reading literacy achievement and behaviors. Accordingly, the cultural, social, political, and economic factors contribute to the milieu of children’s literacy development within a country and community. It is said that “the success a country has in educating its children and producing a literate population depends greatly on the country’s emphasis on the goal of literacy for all, the resources it has available, and the mechanisms it can establish for providing effective programs and incentives that foster reading and improve achievement.”

The historical background of language and literacy in a country can also affect the challenges and instructional practices in teaching children to read. Some countries have one commonly spoken language, but other countries have historical roots in two or more languages and particularly widespread immigration can result in a multilingual culture. Consequently, decisions about the language of instruction can be very difficult. In addition, Mullis (2009) maintains that “the value that a country places on literacy and literacy activities affects the commitment of time and resources necessary for a literature-rich environment.” Outside of school, parents and others within the community can foster an environment that values reading by inviting and sharing experiences with text.

Fletcher-Campbell et al. (2009) succinctly summarize that literacy is a contested concept and that acquiring literacy is a complex process. However, the manifestation of difficulties in literacy helps us to understand the acquisition of literacy far more helpfully than if no difficulties existed. Norton (2010) adds that literacy is not only about reading and writing but also about relationship between text and reader, student and teacher, classroom and community, in local, national, and transnational sites. Defining the word “literate” today should go beyond reading and writing skills, it has to involve digital technology to produce various types of texts in critical and creative ways. Digital Literacy ranked among the top five hot topics at both the community and country levels (International Literacy Association, 2017). It means that it also includes the use of numerous media in its literacy development (Fantin, 2010). A student who is unfamiliar with technology is also proved to have no significant improvement with reading skills. (Leah, 2017).

Moreover, OECD (2010) sums up the idea that in school learning, the application of the knowledge in adult life depends crucially on the acquisition of broader concepts and skills. In reading literacy, the capacity to develop interpretations of written material and to reflect on the content and qualities of text are central skills.

Hayat (2010) on the other hand identified constraints that influencing the low achievement in literacy assessment namely, input and process of education. Constraints of education input cover the insufficiency of educators and educational staff; unavailability of learning facilities or inefficient use of the facilities; and inadequacy of education costs. Constraints of education process comprise of the heavily loaded content, and teacher oriented instructional method. The constriction of this education process will then cause ineffectiveness in instructional practice. Umar et.al. (2009), using Analysis of Covariance Structure with Latent Variables, known as Structural Equation Modeling mention several variables affecting directly on reading literacy achievement. These factors among others are: the students’ self-efficacy, reading homework, and high reading, then followed by teaching method, reading frequency at home, and after reading activities. Self efficacy as a key factor in the students’ achievement is defined as the belief that the students are capable of performing in certain manners to manners or to succeed in specific situation, in this case in reading literacy (Boakye, 2015). According to Bandura (1986), people with high self efficacy are more likely to view difficult tasks as something to be mastered rather than to be avoided because it is a belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the sources of action required to manage prospective situation.

In addition, parent education, which affects students’ attitude and self-efficacy, is one among the factors influencing indirectly on the students’ achievement. Other factors are the school economy status (influencing teacher quality then high reading and/or homework), teaching method (student centered, after reading activities, and adding vocabulary).

**METHODOLOGY**

This paper discusses the results of PISA and identifies determinant factors influencing the students’ performance in reading literacy in Moslem countries. The data of students’ achievement are identified, compared, and analyzed. The analysis is used to portray the students’ performance and the contextual determinant factors influencing the students’ achievement are also identified and analyzed.

The data used in this study are secondary data obtained from OECD report (2010) entitled *PISA 2009 Results: What Students Know and Can Do. Student Performance in Reading, Mathematics and Science*. The data are selected and compared just focusing on ten moslem-majority countries involved in this study, i.e. Albania, Azerbaijan, Dubai (UAE), Indonesia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Qatar, Tunisia, and Turkey. The reason why only ten countries are chosen as the sample of this study is simply because only these countries participate in the 2009 PISA study. In addition, these countries also represent several regions, i.e. Europe (Albania, Turkey), Africa (Tunisia), Far-East (UAE, Jordan, Qatar), West Asia (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan), and South-East Asia (Indonesia).

Descriptive analysis is used to get an overview of the students’ achievement in each country and the determinant factors affecting this attainment.

**RESULTS**

The overall average scores of all Moslem countries in Reading (R), Math (M), and Science (S) literary are R=395.7, M=393,9, and S=399,2 as compared to OECD’s average which are 493, 496, and 501 respectively. In reading literacy, the students from Turkey, Dubai, Jordan, Tunisia, and Indonesia are above the average score. Among the Moslem countries, the students from Turkey have gained the highest score (464), followed by Dubai (UAE, 459), Jordan (405), Tunisia (404), and Indonesia (402). Meanwhile, these students from Kazakhstan (390), Albania (385), Qatar (372), Azerbaijan (362), and Kyrgyzstan (314) are below Moslem average score (395.7) as portrayed in the following Figure.

**Figure 1***: Achievements in Reading Literacy, Moslem Countries and Five Top Achievers*

The gap between two means which is almost 100 points has shown that the students in the Moslem countries are still lag behind the students of the rest of he world. Compared to the top scorer Shanghai-China, the gap is so wide – more than 200 points in Math and 150 in reading literacy.

The percentage of Moslem students are higher in low order thinking ability (level 1 to 3) but lower in higher order thinking, as compared to OECD average and Shanghai-China students. The Figure below shows that the peak of the students’ achievement in the Moslem world is in level 3, while the OECD students is in level 5, and the Shanghai-China is in level 6. The data show that the percentage of Moslem students who can reach the highest level is only 0.07%, in contrast to OECD (0.8%), Shanghai-China (2.4%) and the highest Singapore (2.6%). These students are presumably representatives of world-class achievers (see Figure 2 below).

**Figure 2***: Achievements in lower (1) to higher (8) levels of Literacy*

Very interesting to report here that the Moslem students are better in answering questions with higher order thinking skills. The data in **Table 1** show that the average score of students in lower skills (in this case the ability to access and retrieve information) is the lowest (390.2), compared to the highest skills (to reflect and evaluate message, 394.2). Meanwhile, the ability to integrate and interpret the reading text is he best skills that the students have. This is actually ‘against’ the common law: the questions related to the ability to access and retrieve information are much easier than to reflect and evaluate, as also seen from the OECD average score which is 495 (access and retrieve), 493 (integrate and interpret), and 494 (reflect and evaluate). This phenomenon reveals the fact that the Moslem students need more challenging task to do in day-to-day school activities. This can also be assumed that the teaching and learning reading in Moslem countries has a lower quality than it has to be.

**Table 1**: *Average Scores in Reading sub-Skills*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Countries | *Access*  *and retrieve* | *Integrate*  *and interpret* | *Reflect*  *and evaluate* |
| Kyrgyzstan | 299 | 327 | 300 |
| Azerbaijan | 361 | 373 | 335 |
| Kazakhstan | 397 | 397 | 373 |
| Albania | 380 | 393 | 376 |
| Qatar | 354 | 379 | 376 |
| **Moslem Average** | **390.2** | **398.5** | **394.2** |
| Jordan | 394 | 410 | 407 |
| Indonesia | 399 | 397 | 409 |
| Tunisia | 393 | 393 | 427 |
| Dubai (UAE) | 458 | 457 | 466 |
| Turkey | 467 | 459 | 473 |
| **OECD Average** | **495** | **493** | **494** |

As the reading texts are divided into *continuous texts* and non-continuous texts, the Moslem students are better in reading continuous texts (400.4) rather than non-continuous texts (384.2). This indicates that the students are more accustomed to reading long texts (e.g. short stories, fiction, novel) than non-continuous ones (e.g. booklet, graph, table). The fact can be interpreted that the students have already had good reading habits and are also familiar with other reading activities related to searching quick information from non-continuous passages. However, they still need more both quantity and quality reading activities to extend their reading experiences.

In spite of continuous improvement in most fields, young people in the Moslem world face tremendous problems with their life-skills. The results of PISA have shown that the Moslem schools are not able to prepare their students for a Digital-Age world. In this study, the students ranks lower than all participating countries in reading literacy with average score 395.7, far behind the five top achievers of Shanghai-China, Korea, Finland, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

This study has successfully portrayed the persistently low achievement of our students compared to the students from other participating countries. In a global perspective, our students are in fact susceptible; and consequently, the future of our Moslem world is truly at risk.

The study shows that most of Moslem countries lag behind the average of OECD countries. Most of the students were not able to demonstrate the ability of the most fundamental knowledge and skills for 21th century. Because reading literacy is the basis for self-development, the Moslem worlds face tremendous challenge that less than one percent of students achieve higher literacy rate; those are the ones who will live on in a global society; the rests were at the lowest level who shall show solemn setbacks in applying this ability to extend their knowledge and skills.

The result of these studies is a warning that the Moslem worlds have identical educational problems to solve to prepare the next Moslem generation for a better live facing the challenge of globalization.

As a Moslem community, we are now facing a tremendous risk because less than one percent of students who can achieve higher reading literacy rate – those who will survive in the knowledge society and a competitive world-class competition. They were not able to demonstrate the ability of the most fundamental of the knowledge and skills tested in the PISA. These students certainly have the ability to read, but they show serious difficulties in implementing their ability to help them extend their knowledge and skills in the fields they are interested in.

There are several factors that have impact to the low achievement of the students’ reading ability, which then can be divided into textual and non-textual factors.

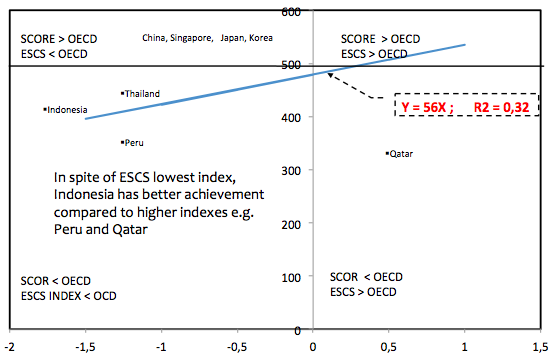
From the textual factors, it seems that the selection of textual elements and sentences tested in PISA are still seen as difficult, especially for a group of students who have insufficient reading exposures. This is presumably because the students are not accustomed to the students in learning to read that demand the ability to explore the elements of the text. The text structure including narrative and descriptive text types are also poorly understood. It seems that the students apparently are not trained to understand the parts of the text structure, so that students can interpret and assess the content of the text. The students’ ability to recognize the elements of language in the text and structure of the text is crucial.

The determinant non-textual factors influencing this low performance identified among others are students’ self-efficacy, reading homework and high reading, teaching method, reading frequency at home, and after-reading activities. In addition, the social-economic condition as can be seen from the economic social and cultural index (ESCS Index), learning resources at home and school, teacher’s education, and students’ learning strategy are also important determinant factors (cf. Cano, et.al., 2014).

Most of Moslem countries, except Turkey, Dubai UAE, and Qatar have lower ESCS index among the participating countries. This results in a condition where education system was not supported by the economic and social system of the country.

However, this weak support did not result in the lowest students’ achievement (cf. Yusuf, 2011; Cano et.al., 2014). Some countries having higher ECSC indexes have even lower achievement, e.g., Indonesia has the lowest index (1.60) than Qatar (0.40), yet the Indonesian students’ average scores (402) are much better than Qatar (372) as seen in the following Figure.

**Figure 3**: ESCS Index Comparison



In detail, the study reported that parent’s education background and occupation, learning resources at home, especially books and computer availability, will influence the reading performance, as well as the language used at home and home location. Reading literacy is  then the most important factor influencing language development and learning among all children; and literature based education has powerful effects on reading and learning. Access to high-interest books and reading material fosters reading engagement and extensive reading (Pihl, et.al., 2017).

**CONCLUSION**

Reading ability is the basis for self-development and the students face remarkable challenge: less than one percent of students achieve higher literacy rate: those are the ones who will survive in global society; meanwhile most of the students in the Moslem countries were at the lower level, those who are basically not able to demonstrate the most essential competence in reading and show serious difficulties in implementing this ability to extend knowledge and skills.

The fact that the Moslem students are better in answering questions with higher order thinking skills reveals that the Moslem students need more challenging task to do in day-to-day school activities. Consequently the teaching and learning reading in Moslem countries has to be more demanding with various tasks so that the students have better practice.

Other information that the Moslem students are better in reading continuous texts than non-continuous texts is a sign that the students are more accustomed to reading long texts which can be deduced that the students have already had good reading ability; however, they still need more both quantity and quality reading activities to extend their reading experiences.

The determinant factors influencing the student’s reading performance and behaviors are the national and community contexts that influence home, classroom, and school activities in reading. This situation then affects the instruction and experiences in student’s reading. In detail, the students’ self-efficacy, reading homework, and high reading, then followed by teaching method, reading frequency at home, and after reading activities affect the students’ achievement. The study also reported that parent’s education background and occupation, learning resources at home, especially books and computer availability, influence reading performance, as well as the language used at home and home location. Whereas the quality of school education resources and school size have also an effect on students’ performance as well as the availability of certified (reading) teachers and full time teachers, the students’ engagement in reading and their learning strategies.

The result of these studies has reminded us that we need a new arrangement in Moslem education system to prepare our students facing the challenge of globalization.

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