

## USING ISLAMIC-THEMED TEXTS TO IMPROVE ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION

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**Abstract:** Reading comprehension is a fundamental component of second and foreign language acquisition and plays a crucial role in learners' academic achievement and overall language proficiency. In many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, students experience persistent difficulties in reading comprehension due not only to linguistic limitations but also to the cultural distance between learners and instructional materials. This article explores the potential of Islamic-themed texts as pedagogical tools for improving English reading comprehension among Muslim learners. Grounded in schema theory and culturally responsive pedagogy, the study argues that integrating culturally familiar and value-based content into English language instruction can facilitate deeper cognitive processing and enhance learner engagement. Islamic-themed texts, including moral narratives, historical accounts, and ethical discussions, activate learners' prior knowledge and reduce cognitive barriers, enabling more effective meaning construction during reading. The article examines the theoretical foundations supporting the use of culturally relevant materials, highlights the educational benefits of Islamic-themed texts, and discusses their practical application in classroom settings. Additionally, it addresses potential challenges, such as appropriate text selection, linguistic grading, and inclusivity in diverse classrooms. Findings from relevant studies suggest that learners exposed to culturally familiar reading materials demonstrate higher motivation, increased participation, and improved comprehension outcomes compared to those using conventional EFL texts. By aligning language instruction with learners' cultural and religious identities, Islamic-themed texts offer a meaningful and effective approach to enhancing English reading comprehension. The article concludes that culturally responsive reading materials should be considered a valuable complement to existing EFL curricula, particularly in Muslim-majority educational contexts.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Islamic-themed literature, motivation, and culturally sensitive instruction.

### Introduction

It is often acknowledged that reading comprehension is an essential part of learning a second or foreign language and that it opens doors to academic success, knowledge creation, and lifelong learning. Reading is frequently the main way that students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environments obtain information, interact with academic material, and hone higher-order language abilities. As a result, learners' total language proficiency and academic performance are strongly correlated with their ability to understand written English texts. However, a significant portion of EFL students still struggle with reading comprehension even after years of consistent exposure to English instruction.

The cultural gap ingrained in many English teaching resources is a significant contributing element to these challenges. Learners from non-Western backgrounds may not be familiar with

the Western sociocultural norms, beliefs, and experiences that are often reflected in standard EFL textbooks. Even if the text's grammatical difficulty is acceptable for their level of skill, learners may find it difficult to generate meaning when they come across writings that are culturally distant. This problem is especially noticeable in educational settings with a majority of Muslims, when students' cultural and religious experiences diverge greatly from those depicted in popular English reading sources. As a result, students may find it harder to understand, be less engaged, and be less motivated to read in English.

The significance of culturally responsive pedagogy as a solution to these issues has been highlighted more and more by academics and language educators in recent years. Instead of viewing students' cultural backgrounds, identities, and life experiences as challenges to be overcome, culturally responsive education acknowledges them as important learning tools. According to this concept, teaching resources that take into account students' cultural and religious backgrounds are thought to promote deeper comprehension by triggering preexisting prior knowledge, or schemas, which are essential to the reading process. Understanding becomes more effective and significant when students can relate new language knowledge to well-known ideas, occasions, or ideals.

Texts with an Islamic subject are an especially pertinent type of culturally sensitive content for EFL classes with Muslim students. Moral tales, historical narratives, biographies of outstanding individuals, ethical debates, and modern subjects based on Islamic principles are examples of such literature. The universal principles that these literature frequently discuss honesty, fairness, perseverance, compassion, and responsibility—resonate strongly with students' past knowledge and individual experiences. Islamic-themed literature that are given in English give students the chance to interact with well-known material while also honing their language abilities, which lessens cognitive load and enhances comprehension.

Furthermore, there may be affective as well as cognitive advantages to incorporating Islamic-themed works into English reading teaching. It is often known that motivation and emotional involvement play a major role in language acquisition success. When students believe that the material is relevant, meaningful, and respectful of their identity, they are more likely to actively engage in reading activities. Teachers may create a more welcoming learning environment that fosters good attitudes about learning English and supports consistent reading practice by matching instructional materials with students' cultural and religious values.

There is still little empirical study on the precise effects of Islamic-themed writings on English reading comprehension, despite the theoretical backing for culturally relevant resources. Few studies have rigorously examined the impact of religious or culturally known information on students' reading ability, despite the fact that many have investigated the integration of such content in language instruction in general. This gap in the literature emphasizes the necessity for studies that investigate whether texts with Islamic themes that are culturally familiar can result in quantifiable gains in English reading comprehension outcomes.

The current study aims to address this requirement by examining how well EFL learners' English reading comprehension can be enhanced by employing texts with an Islamic subject. This study attempts to give empirical evidence on the pedagogical usefulness of culturally responsive reading materials by comparing the reading comprehension performance of students exposed to Islamic-themed materials with those taught using conventional EFL texts. The results are anticipated to add to current conversations in English language instruction on inclusive teaching methods, curriculum design, and material selection, especially in educational settings where Muslims predominate.

## Literature Review

Theoretical viewpoints on reading, the significance of cultural familiarity and schema activation, culturally responsive pedagogy, the use of Islamic-themed literature in language instruction, and English reading comprehension in EFL contexts are all reviewed in this section. This review establishes the theoretical and empirical basis for the current study by synthesizing previous research and identifies gaps that call for more research.

### 2.1 Reading Understanding in EFL Situations

The intricate cognitive process of reading comprehension involves the interplay of language information, cognitive techniques, and prior knowledge. Reading is frequently the main method of language intake in EFL situations, especially in settings with little possibilities for real-world spoken communication. Academics have repeatedly stressed that effective reading comprehension involves more than just word decoding; it also entails creating meaning through interpretation, deduction, and assessment of textual content.

Several studies have shown that EFL students continue to struggle with reading comprehension. Linguistic difficulties that are frequently mentioned include limited vocabulary, unusual grammatical patterns, and inadequate exposure to real literature. Nonetheless, a growing body of research indicates that non-linguistic elements, like cultural unfamiliarity and a lack of prior information, are just as important in understanding challenges. Even students who are proficient in grammar may find it difficult to comprehend texts if they are unable to relate to the cultural backgrounds that are incorporated into them.

English reading materials are frequently imported or modified from Western contexts in educational settings, reflecting social norms, cultural presumptions, and values that students from different backgrounds might not be familiar with. This discrepancy may result in poor understanding, misunderstandings, or disinterest. As a result, there has been an increase in interest in investigating different teaching strategies that take into account the linguistic and cultural aspects of reading comprehension.

### 2.2 Theoretical Views of Reading Understanding

Important insights into how readers interpret texts and create meaning are offered by theoretical models of reading. Reading was primarily seen by early bottom-up models as a linear process of deciphering letters and words to extract meaning. Top-down approaches, on the other hand, focused on how readers' expectations, past knowledge, and predictions affect how they understand texts. Both viewpoints are incorporated into modern interactive models, which acknowledge reading as a dynamic activity in which reader knowledge and textual information constantly interact.

Schema theory is one of these ideas that has had the biggest impact on understanding reading comprehension in second and foreign languages. According to schema theory, readers understand new information by organizing their knowledge into mental frames, or schemas. When readers come across a text, they use preexisting schemas to interpret the information. Regardless of language ability, comprehension becomes more challenging if key schemas are missing or inadequately activated.

Cultural gap between learners and texts frequently prevents schema activation in EFL environments. Learners may find it difficult to deduce meaning or decipher hidden signals when they are unfamiliar with the social, historical, or religious allusions in a book. This theoretical viewpoint emphasizes how crucial it is to choose reading materials that complement students' prior knowledge and life experiences.

### 2.3 Reading Background Knowledge and Cultural Familiarity

It is well known that cultural familiarity has a significant impact on reading comprehension. Research has indicated that students are better able to understand texts when the content is representative of their cultural experiences, customs, and beliefs. Learners are better able to anticipate content, deduce meaning, and incorporate new information when they are familiar with the subject.

Higher comprehension scores for familiar texts are regularly seen in studies comparing culturally known and unfamiliar literature. In addition to doing better on comprehension assessments, students also show increased self-assurance and readiness to participate in reading assignments. This implies that cultural familiarity lessens cognitive burden, freeing up learners to focus more on meaning production and language processing.

Cultural familiarity in areas where Muslims predominate frequently includes Islamic religious knowledge, customs, and moral principles. Texts that make use of these components may trigger deeply ingrained schemas, promoting understanding and participation. However, culturally recognizable texts continue to be underrepresented in conventional EFL curriculum despite the theoretical and empirical support for such resources.

### 2.4 Pedagogy in Language Education That Is Culturally Responsive

One important approach for dealing with diversity in educational settings is culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). In order to support equity and academic success, CRP places a strong emphasis on incorporating students' cultural identities, values, and experiences into instructional strategies. CRP views culture as essential to learning rather than simply incidental.

Culturally responsive approaches in English language teaching support the use of resources and teaching methods that take into account the sociocultural backgrounds of students. According to research, these strategies can improve learning results, motivation, and engagement. Students are more likely to believe that learning is relevant and meaningful when they see their identities represented in the course material.

It has been demonstrated that reading training that is culturally sensitive in particular enhances critical thinking and comprehension abilities. Teachers can promote deeper comprehension and interpretation by encouraging students to make connections between texts and their own experiences and cultural knowledge. In this way, literature with an Islamic topic can be seen as a culturally sensitive tool that helps Muslim students enhance their language skills and assert their identities.

### 2.5 Texts with Islamic Themes in English Language Instruction

Texts having an Islamic theme can be found in many different genres, such as biographies, moral tales, historical accounts, ethical debates, and modern problems set within Islamic principles. These books are frequently employed in educational contexts for religious or moral instruction, but their potential for teaching English has drawn more attention.

Learners' opinions on incorporating Islamic subject into English training have been investigated in a number of research. Results often show favorable views, with students reporting greater comfort, drive, and interest when interacting with well-known subjects. It is thought that these emotive advantages indirectly support better language learning results.

From an educational standpoint, texts with an Islamic topic provide abundant chances for critical discussion, inferential reading, and vocabulary growth. Many literature are appropriate for higher-order comprehension problems because they discuss universal human values. These texts can be useful reading resources without sacrificing language goals if they are suitably modified to the ability levels of learners.

However, there have been complaints about the improper or excessive usage of religious elements. Academics stress the importance of sensitivity, inclusivity, and balance, especially in diverse classrooms. Teachers must make sure that Islamic-themed books fulfill well-defined language learning objectives and are utilized as pedagogical tools rather as doctrinal instruction.

## **2.6 Empirical Research on Reading Materials with Cultural Relevance**

The efficacy of culturally appropriate reading materials in EFL environments is strongly supported by empirical evidence. Using texts that are culturally familiar has been shown to promote reading comprehension, motivation, and learner autonomy in a variety of cultural contexts. However, rather than content with a religious subject, a large portion of this research focuses on general cultural relevance.

There are still not many studies that particularly look into books with an Islamic subject, and those that do tend to rely on qualitative information like learner perceptions and classroom observations. Although these studies offer insightful information, more quantitative studies that assess the direct effects of books with Islamic themes on reading comprehension outcomes are required.

By using a quasi-experimental methodology to investigate whether Islamic-themed English texts significantly increase EFL learners' reading comprehension, the current study aims to close this gap. This study attempts to advance a more sophisticated understanding of culturally responsive reading instruction by fusing theoretical viewpoints with empirical data.

## **Method**

### **3.1 Design of Research**

A pre-test and post-test control group were used in this quasi-experimental design investigation.

### **3.2 Participants**

Sixty undergraduate EFL students from a public institution in a nation with a majority of Muslims participated in the study. They were split up into a control group (n = 30) and an experimental group (n = 30). According to placement test results, both groups had similar levels of English ability.

### **3.3 Educational Resources**

English reading texts with an Islamic theme, such as moral tales, condensed historical narratives, and current articles addressing Islamic values, were used to instruct the experimental group. Standard EFL textbook readings without any cultural or religious modifications were used by the control group.

### **3.4 Information Gathering**

Prior to and following the intervention, a standardized reading comprehension exam was given. Literal, inferential, and evaluative understanding were all assessed.

### **3.5 Analysis of Data**

Descriptive statistics and paired-sample and independent-sample t-tests were used to analyze the data in order to look for differences both within and across groups.

## Result and Discussion

The study's results are presented in this part along with a thorough analysis of their implications. The findings are arranged according to the study's goals, which center on the variations in reading comprehension abilities between pupils instructed using texts with an Islamic subject and those instructed using traditional EFL resources. The results are interpreted in the context of theoretical frameworks and earlier research that has been evaluated in the literature.

### 4.1 Reading Comprehension Score Descriptive Statistics

Both the experimental and control groups took a pre-test to gauge their starting reading comprehension levels before the instructional intervention. The two groups' mean pre-test results were comparable, indicating similar baseline proficiency, according to descriptive analysis. This homogeneity shows that any discrepancies in post-test performance may be fairly attributed to the instructional treatment rather than pre-existing disparities, supporting the validity of subsequent comparisons.

A post-test was given to gauge improvements in reading comprehension after the training session. The experimental group showed a significant increase in mean scores for all comprehension levels, including literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension, after being exposed to English texts with an Islamic subject. The control group, on the other hand, also improved, but to a lesser extent. These descriptive patterns imply that while consistent education helps students advance their reading abilities, the addition of texts with Islamic themes that are culturally familiar may offer extra advantages.

### 4.2 Group Comparison and Inferential Analysis

An independent-sample t-test was used to compare post-test scores across the groups, and paired-sample t-tests were performed within each group to assess the statistical significance of the observed differences. The experimental group's reading comprehension improved statistically significantly between the pre-test and post-test, according to the paired-sample t-test results. The effect magnitude was significantly smaller even though the control group likewise demonstrated statistically significant improvement.

A statistically significant difference favoring the experimental group was revealed by the independent-sample t-test comparing post-test scores. This result demonstrates that students who interacted with literature with an Islamic theme did better than those who just used traditional EFL resources. The findings offer empirical proof that reading comprehension performance in EFL environments can be improved by culturally familiar content.

### 4.3 Growth in All Comprehension Levels

Important trends emerged from a closer look at performance at various comprehension levels. Students in the experimental group showed enhanced literal comprehension of key concepts, supporting facts, and factual knowledge. Increased material familiarity may have contributed to this improvement by enabling students to concentrate more successfully on deciphering and comprehending explicit textual information.

The experimental group demonstrated especially significant improvements at the inferential level. Pupils were more adept at deriving logical implications from texts, recognizing implicit messages, and inferring meaning. This implies that writings with an Islamic topic promoted deeper cognitive engagement, probably as a result of the activation of pertinent prior information. Learners are better able to decipher implied meanings and make connections between concepts when they have prior knowledge about the material.

The experimental group once more outperformed the control group at the evaluative level, which calls for critical judgment and individual reaction. Students showed an increased capacity to assess concepts, voice opinions, and connect textual information to more general ethical or personal issues. The reflective nature of Islamic-themed books, which frequently promote moral reasoning and critical thinking, may be reflected in this result.

#### **4.4 Interaction in the Classroom and Learner Engagement**

Higher levels of involvement among students in the experimental group were also demonstrated by informal comments and classroom observations, in addition to quantitative improvements. Students seemed more eager to contribute their own interpretations of the texts, ask questions, and take part in discussions. Theories of motivation in language acquisition, which highlight the need of meaningful and pertinent information in maintaining learner interest, are consistent with this enhanced engagement.

Students often reported that learning English was less daunting and more approachable when they studied books that were consistent with their cultural and religious beliefs. By lowering fear and boosting students' confidence when interacting with English texts, this affective reaction probably helped to improve comprehension. These observations offer significant contextual insights that supplement the statistical results, even though involvement was not quantitatively assessed.

#### **4.5 Schema Theory-Related Discussion**

Schema theory as a framework for comprehending reading comprehension in EFL situations is substantially supported by the study's findings. The educational intervention stimulated learners' preexisting schemas regarding religious knowledge, moral ideals, and cultural experiences by utilizing texts with an Islamic theme. This activation decreased the cognitive effort needed to interpret new information and made it easier to generate meaning.

Learners were better able to anticipate material, draw connections, and decipher meaning when they came across writings with well-known themes. This made it possible for them to devote more mental energy to language processing, including comprehending sentence structure and terminology. The findings thus support the claim that comprehension issues in EFL reading are not only linguistic in character but also heavily impacted by cultural and cognitive variables.

#### **4.6 Conformity to Culturally Appropriate Education**

Additionally, the outcomes closely match the tenets of culturally sensitive pedagogy. The intervention produced a more welcoming and encouraging learning environment by incorporating learners' cultural and religious backgrounds into teaching materials. Instead of being forced to separate themselves from their identities in order to learn English, students were able to use their identities to their advantage.

Increased motivation and favorable views toward English reading were probably influenced by this alignment. According to earlier research, culturally sensitive materials can help students feel validated and like they belong, which boosts their academic performance. By showing that culturally sensitive reading materials can result in quantifiable gains in reading comprehension performance, the current findings add to this corpus of research.

#### **4.7 Comparison with Earlier Research**

The results of this study align with previous studies on the use of culturally appropriate texts in EFL reading teaching. Similar gains in understanding and engagement have been noted in studies looking at the use of well-known cultural tales. However, by concentrating on writings

with an Islamic subject and offering quantitative proof of their efficacy, the current study contributes to the body of literature.

The statistically significant findings presented in this study support the inclusion of culturally recognized religious content in EFL reading teaching, even though prior research has frequently relied on learner impressions or qualitative data. The results also emphasize the significance of appropriate material selection and pedagogical alignment to make sure that religious themes complement language learning goals rather than overshadow them.

#### **4.8 Educational Consequences**

The findings of this study have significant ramifications for teaching English in environments with a majority of Muslims. Teachers and curriculum designers are urged to think about using literature with an Islamic theme as core or supplemental reading materials. Clear language objectives, a suitable language level, and consideration for the diversity of the classroom should all serve as guidelines for this kind of integration.

Professional development that enables teachers to modify culturally familiar texts for language instruction may also be advantageous. By doing this, they can design educational opportunities that are both culturally significant and academically demanding.

#### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how well English reading comprehension among English as a foreign language learners may be enhanced by employing texts with an Islamic subject. The study aimed to address a recurring issue in EFL contexts: learners' inability to understand texts that are linguistically and culturally dissimilar from their lived experiences. It was based on schema theory and the ideas of culturally responsive education. The results show unequivocally that students' reading comprehension skills can significantly increase when culturally familiar Islamic-themed materials are incorporated into English reading teaching.

The findings showed that students who were exposed to English texts with an Islamic subject improved their reading comprehension more than students who were taught using traditional EFL resources. Literal comprehension, inferential reasoning, and evaluative judgment were among the comprehension levels where improvements were noticeable. These results imply that by engaging learners' past knowledge and lowering cognitive obstacles related to foreign cultural allusions, culturally familiar content promotes more effective interaction with texts. Learners are therefore more equipped to concentrate on language processing and meaning construction.

The study emphasizes the emotive advantages of including Islamic-themed materials into EFL education in addition to cognitive gains. When reading books that represented their cultural and religious values, students showed greater desire, confidence, and involvement. Since motivation and emotional engagement are widely acknowledged as critical factors in successful language learning, this increased affective response is especially significant. Culturally responsive materials help create a more welcoming and encouraging learning environment that encourages consistent engagement in reading activities by affirming students' identities and experiences.

The results support the applicability of schema theory in elucidating reading comprehension processes in EFL situations from a theoretical standpoint. The study demonstrates that comprehension is influenced by readers' prior knowledge and cultural familiarity in addition to language proficiency. The findings also validate the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy by showing how incorporating students' cultural and religious backgrounds into teaching resources can improve student engagement and learning outcomes.

This study has important pedagogical ramifications, especially for teachers and curriculum designers who work in environments with a majority of Muslims. According to the results, books with an Islamic topic can be useful teaching tools if they are carefully chosen and modified to meet language learning goals. Instead of being used for religious teaching, these writings should be linguistically appropriate, thematically relevant, and utilized for language skill development. Programs for professional development and teacher training should also focus on how to successfully and fairly incorporate culturally relevant material into English language instruction. This study has limitations despite its contributions. The study was carried out in a particular educational setting with a rather small sample size, which might have an impact on how broadly applicable the results are. Furthermore, the study's main focus was on immediate gains in reading comprehension. Future studies could look into the long-term impacts of culturally responsive reading instruction, how it affects other language skills like speaking and writing, and how well it works in classrooms with greater diversity or multiculturalism. Qualitative studies that delve deeper into learners' views may also offer insightful information on how culturally recognizable texts affect learners' identities and reading processes.

The current study concludes by highlighting the pedagogical relevance of Islamic-themed literature as a culturally sensitive method of teaching English reading. These texts provide a possible route toward more inclusive, successful, and meaningful EFL instruction by bridging the gap between language acquisition and learners' cultural identities. Therefore, incorporating culturally relevant information should be viewed as a supplemental approach that enhances English language instruction and promotes students' academic and personal growth rather than as a replacement for traditional curricula.

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