

An Analysis of Religious Scholars' Needs for Reading Religious Texts Written in English

*Naveed Ahmad

**Qamar Khushi

Abstract

Religious scholars, in their research pursuits, need to look into the books written on religions in English language. Most religious scholars complain that they feel difficulty in comprehending texts written in English on the topic of religion. In response to this problem, the present study has been carried out so that religious scholars' reading needs be highlighted to recommend an English language course for reading religious genres. For this research, after reviewing literature in the area of language and religion, data was collected from religious scholars. Structured interviews were conducted. The findings revealed that texts written in English on religious topics pose difficulty in comprehension and cause delays in carrying out the academic tasks. It was also pointed out by many that scholars had to abandon research topics that required reading of texts written in English. Based on the findings of the research, and taking insights from the literature on language and religion, an English language course for reading religious genres has been recommended which will address the problem.

Keywords: Language & Religion, Needs Analysis, English for Religious Studies, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Syllabus Design

1. Introduction:

In Pakistan, mostly, the medium of religious studies is Urdu. In schools, the subject of Islamic Studies/Islamiyat is taught through Urdu medium of instruction. This subject is compulsory up to graduation level but at all levels the medium is Urdu. In very exceptional cases, some students go for the option of English as a medium of taking exam. Even English medium schools teach this subject in Urdu. However, a very small fraction of English medium schools teach this subject in English. At MA level, the medium of Islamic Studies is also Urdu. Consequently, those who go for research degrees like M.Phil and PhD, carry out their studies through Urdu medium of instruction. The scholars have expertise in Urdu as it is the national language. Moreover, they can read Arabic as well because it is the language of the Holy Quran which is a part of the studies in the subject Islamic Studies.

At higher level i.e. M.Phil and PhD, scholars need to extend their reading lists significantly by adding books written in English and Arabic as research requires in-depth review of literature.

* Associate Professor, Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.

**Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.

However, as Pakistani scholars of Islamic Studies have been carrying out their studies through Urdu medium of instruction, their exposure to English at higher level of studies make them in trouble. It has been reported by students and professors that students at this level feel difficulty comprehending English medium texts. The net result is that quality suffers. Or, students prefer research topics that require minimum or no reading in English. This tendency limits the growth of our religious studies by remaining confined due to inadequate competence in English.

The problem as such is serious. Our religious scholars' out-put has become questionable. Moreover, they lack confidence while studying abroad. To address this problem, the present study has been carried out. The purpose is to identify religious scholars' linguistic problems with reference to reading religious texts in English, and provide solutions in the form of recommending a reading course that will equip them with the tools to carry out their academic religious pursuits in English where required. This course could be embedded with Islamic studies courses at university level.

In the light of the above mentioned discussion, I generated the following research questions:

Main Research Question:

To what extent do the scholars in the field of Islamic studies have competence with reference to comprehending texts produced in English on the topics related to religion/s?

Subsidiary Questions:

- To what extent specific vocabulary related to religion cause them problem?
- To what extent specific sentence structure related to religion cause them problem?
- To what extent specific discourse patterns related to religion cause them problem?

The research was limited to reading skills because students adopt Urdu medium, but for extensive review of literature, they need to read books written in English as well.

To find out the answers to these questions, interview, as a tool, was adapted. First, a list of topics was created (see *Appendix A*). To get information on these topics, these topics were converted into interview questions. The questions were open-ended and structured (see *Appendix B*). Data was analyzed qualitatively.

The subjects were M.A, M.Phil and PhD level present and past scholars. Research site was Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. Total number of subjects was thirty. Ten were from M.A, ten from M.phil and ten from PhD. From each category half of the subjects were present scholars for these degrees and half were the ones who had already secured their degrees in the past. The purpose was that both past and present students should be taken under consideration because the present scholars are handling with academic situations and the past scholars have information related to past academic situations and current professional situations.

2. Literature Review:

The term religious language is intended to cover the language of absolutely all religious activities (Fudge, 2006: 528). Religions might exhibit homogeneity of linguistic style across all linguistic contexts. Therefore, it would be straightforward to say that there is “a single type of religious language”. However, religious language comprises a vast range of genres including Holy Scriptures, narratives, laws, sayings by the prophets, religious speeches, commentaries, analyses and interpretations etc. In this context, Crystal (1987) enlisted a set of linguistic forms of religious language. These include *liturgical forms, preaching, ritual forms, readings from sacred texts, doctrinal statements* and *private affirmations*. Most religious discourses have persuasive power.

Keane (1997) points out that religious language is distinct in nature. This distinctiveness is at various levels: lexical, syntactic and discourse. The language has been investigated at different points in time from different perspectives. Some of the richest works on religious language focus on meaning, especially conveyed by metaphor (Calame-Griaule 1986; Fernandez 1982, 1986 & Wagner 1986). This is because of the fact that metaphor plays an important role in conveying religious messages. These studies tend to “stress the richness and polyvalent qualities” of religious language.

Features related to performance are another area that has been investigated by Du Bois (1986). With this regard, angles of investigation have been: stylized and restricted intonational contours, gestalt knowledge (speakers often learn texts as a whole and cannot recite them in parts), personal volition disclaimer (crediting a traditional source for one's words), avoidance of first and second person pronouns, and mediation through several speakers, voice quality and fluency etc. Similarly textual features are analyzed in the works of Keane (1997), Boyer (1990) and other by investigating archaic elements, elements borrowed from other languages, euphemism, and opaqueness of meaning, semantic-grammatical parallelism and the use of ritual register. Further, communication with the invisible is investigated by Robson (1994).

Review of literature in the area of religious language also reveals that a significant amount of works are available that focus on the use of quotations in religious texts as quotes is very common in religious communication. The analyses of Trix (1993), Janowitz (1989) and others are significant in this context.

Some other angles of investigation relate to *text and context*, and intelligibility issues. *Text and context* is examined by Lopez (1990) and others, whereas Irvine (1982) studied intelligibility.

3. Data Analysis:

This section provides the findings of the research. Interview was taken as a tool for this research, and this interview was structured. Thirty subjects were taken under consideration. Their details have been mentioned above.

Data was analyzed qualitatively. Responses were noted. Next, themes were created, and subsequently, findings have been presented below in the form of presentation of the main ideas created from the responses. The respondents' quotes are also imbedded to support the main ideas. As the respondents' utterances were mainly in Urdu because they were not feeling comfortable with English, their quotes presented here are the translations into English. The interview had nine questions. The analysis of each question has been given below.

1) ***Comprehending religious vocabulary in English texts:***

Most participants mentioned that vocabulary related to their own religion that is Islam does not cause any difficulty because mostly the original words in Arabic are used in English in italicized form. They mentioned as they have been aware of these terms since long therefore, there is no problem at all. However, in case these words are translated into English, they do cause problems and we have to go to the dictionary again and again.

Talking about the religious vocabulary, they mentioned another significant point. According to the majority, vocabulary related to other religions pose a serious threat in terms of comprehension because such a vocabulary is not used while studying other religions through Urdu medium of instruction.

In conclusion, it has been observed that only the Arabic words related to Islam produced in English texts as such are comprehensible. However, their English translations are incomprehensible. Plus, vocabulary related to other religions in English medium texts pose serious difficulties.

2) ***Comprehending the main ideas of paragraphs:***

Generally, the respondents, according to their views, had difficulty in understanding the main ideas of paragraphs. They could have a vague idea about the paragraphs themes but clear understanding of paragraphs' main ideas was lacking. The following quote of a respondent reflects an overall representative view of the subjects in this context:

... my M.Phil my supervisor told me to read books on my topic in English for knowing other people's view about Islam. I took a book and started reading it. Even the first paragraph was not clear. So I never took any book from library that was in English ...

So the findings revealed that the subjects' comprehension in this context was inadequate.

3) ***Comprehending overall message in the text:***

When the respondents were asked whether they could comprehend the overall message in the text, the majority opined that to some extent they could comprehend. They remain confused about most points in the texts that hamper comprehension. Also, some subjects revealed that they cannot comprehend the overall message at all. The following quote is relevant:

When I read articles in English for my PhD dissertation, I cannot understand the writer's message even after reading it many times. Then I

go to someone whose English is very good. I ask him to translate. He does it, and I understand.

In summary, the subjects were inadequate in comprehending the overall message in the text.

4) ***Inferring the meanings from the text***

Before asking the question related to inference, I explained each respondent the meaning of inference and the techniques normally used for inferring. According to the data analysis, the subjects were totally unable to infer. They were of the view that even comprehension of the clearly stated contents was difficult, how come the skill of inferring meaning from the text could be adequate. The following comment further clarifies the views of the subjects:

We cannot understand very simple English. We cannot understand simply stated facts and opinions. Inferring is not possible for us. Nor have we been taught at any point in our educational history to infer.

So, the analysis revealed that inferring sounds highly difficult.

5) ***Skimming the text:***

They were explained the meaning skimming and the techniques of skimming while asking the question whether they had the ability to skim the text. Only one subject was aware of the technique, but he too had never used this technique practically. The rest of the respondents were not aware of the technique of skimming, and hence had never used it.

6) ***Scanning the text:***

Results with reference to this technique were exactly similar to the ones related to skimming.

7) ***Comprehending the complex sentence structure:***

Most religious texts genres have complex sentence structures. The respondents were asked the question whether they could understand such structures adequately. Majority replied that they have inadequate competence in this area. However, two out of the total of thirty subjects mentioned that they can understand after reading various times. See the following comment of a subject:

... reading again and again improves understanding of complex sentences ...

Therefore, subjects were unable to comprehend complex sentence structures in religious genres.

8) ***Comprehending discourse patterns: interpretation, analysis etc.***

The subjects were explained the terms discourse and discourse types in interpretations and analysis. Their views revealed that religious genres' discourse patterns are complex, and one who is good at English can understand such discourse patterns related to interpretations and analyses etc. The following two quotes are significant:

... Analyses are tedious in religions. In Urdu we can easily grasp the organizational schemes in the analyses and interpretations, but in English it is difficult ...

9) ***Respondents' general comments on their reading skills***

In this case, the respondents were asked if they were to give any general comments regarding their reading skills. The findings revealed that the respondents were well aware about their limitations and reasons for these limitations in the context of reading skills. The respondents mentioned that the subject of Islamic Studies has been taught in Urdu, and that is the reason for their inadequate competence. They never took interest in learning English. The result has been a problematic situation at higher studies levels where extensive reading (including books written in English) is required for quality assurance.

Another significant point was that many respondents revealed that they lose scholarship opportunities due to inadequate reading skills because they cannot have good scores in IELTS and TOFEL, pre-requisites for winning scholarships. Notice a comment:

I wanted to go aboard for PhD, but could not win the scholarship because of very low score in TOFEL, especially in the reading section. Great loss!

On the other hand, two subjects mentioned that they have been to the UK on a seminar to take part in a Round Table discussion. They could not perform well in the discussion because of poor English. Moreover, their research was not published because it was not in accordance with the standard norms of writing scholarly papers with reference to appropriate usage of English language. They further mentioned:

Had they adequate reading skills in English, they would have improved all the skills of English language ... we would have become an international scholar. English is hindrance to excel.

It became clear from the findings related to this question that many scholars abandon research topics when they come to know that the topics require reading English texts. Similarly, the tendency, in general, is to go for the topics which are easier, localized, and require no readings of texts written in English.

4. Conclusion:

The overall situation is that religious scholars have inadequate competence in reading skills. All the answers to the questions have confirmed this fact. The major reasons are: 1) Urdu medium backgrounds as the subject is taught in Urdu, and 2) linguistic complexity of religious genres. The problem is serious: 1) quality of research suffers; 2) internationally valuable research topics are not given due consideration, and 3) religious studies disciplines remain static and orthodox in their approaches. To meet the challenges of the contemporary world, extensive reading including reading of texts written in English is required in the context of religious studies in Pakistan. As an outcome of this research the following recommendations have been given with reference to introducing a reading course for religious scholars.

5. Recommendations:

A course entitled *Reading Religious Texts in English* is recommended based upon the findings of this research and insights from review of literature in the field language and religion. This course could be introduced at universities in Pakistan. The recommended course is worth 3 credit hours and can be introduced at BS, MA, M.Phil and PhD levels in the discipline of Islamic Studies. However, for each level, variations could be created by the teachers in terms of difficulty levels keeping in view the students' existing level of proficiency in reading. These variations could be created in the selection of texts: easy to difficult, communicative activities, volume of homework assignments etc. Teachers should have training in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) so that they could select design and adapt materials on their own. Communicative Teaching Methodology should be followed. Materials should be authentic religious texts. All the major genres of religious texts should be taken under consideration so that the students must have direct exposure to the genres of religious texts. The major religious genres that should be used for reading materials are as follows:

- Holy Scriptures translated into English
- Interpretations
- Commentaries
- Holy Speeches
- Sayings of the Prophets
- Narratives in religious texts
- Truces/Laws/Agreements

The reading course could be divided into different units. For example, each of the above mentioned text type can have a separate unit. Students should be given direct exposure to the authentic materials i.e. original texts. Each reading lesson must be followed by a variety of communicative activities. Through these communicative activities the following skills should be taught:

- Finding main ideas
- Skimming
- Scanning
- Inference
- Distinguishing facts from opinion
- Comprehending analysis
- Comprehending interpretations
- Comprehending complex sentences in religious texts
- Understanding specific vocabulary of religious texts
- Understanding symbolism/metaphor
- Understanding miscellaneous discourse patterns found in religious texts

References:

Boyer P. 1990. *Tradition as Truth and Communication: A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press

- Calame-Griaule G. 1986. (1965). *Words and the Dogon World*. Philadelphia: Inst. Study Hum. Issues
- Crystal, D. 1987. *Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge University Press
- Du Bois JW. 1986. Self-evidence and ritual speech. In *Evidentiality: The Linguistic Coding of Epistemology*, ed. W Chafe, J Nichols, pp. 313.36. Norwood, NJ: Ablex
- Fudge, E. 2006 Religious Language. In *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. Cambridge University Press
- Fernandez JW. 1982. *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Fernandez JW. 1986. *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press
- Irvine JT. 1982. The creation of identity in spirit mediumship and possession. In *Semantic Anthropology*, ed. D Parkin, pp. 241.60. London: Academic
- Janowitz N. 1989. *Poetics of Ascent: Theories of Language in a Rabbinic Ascent Text*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press
- Keane W. 1997. *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society*. Berkeley: Univ. Calif. Press
- Keane W. 1997. Religious Language. In *Annual Review by Annual Review Inc.*
- Lopez DS. 1990. Inscripting the Bodhisattva's speech: on the *Heart Sutra's mantra*. *Hist. Relig.* 29:351.72
- Robson SO. 1994. Speaking to God in Javanese. *l. Homme* 132, 34(4):133.42
- Trix F. 1993. *Spiritual Discourse: Learning with an Islamic Master*. Philadelphia: Univ. Penn. Press
- Wagner R. 1986. *Symbols That Stand for Themselves*. Chicago/London: Univ. Chicago Press

List of Topics for Interview Questions

- 1 Respondents' views about comprehending religious vocabulary in English texts
- 2 Respondents' views about comprehending the main ideas of paragraphs
- 3 Respondents' views about comprehending overall message in the text
- 4 Respondents' views about inferring the meanings from the text
- 5 Respondents' views about their ability to skim the text
- 6 Respondents' views about their ability to scan the text
- 7 Respondents' views about comprehending the complex sentence structure
- 8 Respondents' views about comprehending discourse patterns: interpretation, analysis etc
- 9 Respondents' general comments on their reading skills

Interview Questions

- 1) What are your views about comprehending religious vocabulary in English texts?
- 2) What are your views about comprehending the main ideas of paragraphs?
- 3) What are your views about comprehending overall message in the text?
- 4) What are your views about inferring the meanings from the text?
- 5) What are your views about their ability to skim the text?
- 6) What are your views about their ability to scan the text?
- 7) What are your views about comprehending the complex sentence structure?
- 8) What are your views about comprehending discourse patterns: interpretation, analysis etc?
- 9) Would you like to comment on anything else?