The Interaction Between Arabic and Bahasa Melayu in Traditional Islamic Schools in Bangkok: An Analysis and Alternative Approach

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Abstract

Traditional Islamic schools are institutions where Arabic and Bahasa Melayu (Malay) function together as mediums for Islamic learning. This study aims to explore, analyze, and propose strategies for utilizing both Arabic and Bahasa Melayu in teaching. The data were collected through field surveys and in-depth interviews with 15 teachers and 25 students from five traditional Islamic schools that employ Arabic and Bahasa Melayu in their curricula. The findings revealed that Bahasa Melayu represents regional Islam, whereas Arabic serves as the global language of Islam. In Bangkok, most Muslims are of Melayu descent who have adapted to Thai culture. Although they may not be able to preserve their Melayu identity in terms of language, they can connect their Muslim identity with Bahasa Melayu in traditional Islamic schools through religious education. Understanding the interaction between Arabic and Bahasa Melayu in this context requires consideration of language, identity preservation, and cultural heritage. Moreover, this suggests that traditional Islamic schools should develop Arabic and Bahasa Melayu teaching and instruction. To express both global and regional Muslim identities within the context of Bangkok, the capital city with a strong Thai identity.

Keywords: *Arabic; Bahasa Melayu; Bangkok; Malay Language; Pondok; Traditional Islamic Schools*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic education in Thailand was mentioned by the Private School Act B.E. 2554 (2011), which defines "non-formal schools" to include Islamic education centers at mosques (Tadika) and Pondok educational institutions (Bashiroh et al., 2024; Yasingo et al., 2022). In contrast to formal schools, the government does not subsidize traditional Islamic schools (Salleh et al., 2011). Hence, financial support largely comes from local Muslim communities through donations and compulsory charity, such as Zakat, or voluntary charity, such as Sadaqah.

In the education system of traditional Islamic schools, both Pondok and Madrasah Arabic and Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language) had important roles. While Arabic is directly linked to Islam because of its association with the birthplace of the religion and religious texts, Bahasa Melayu with Arabic Scripts (Jawi) has played a crucial role in the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia (Al-Tinggary, 2008; Hasan & Daud, 2020). Historically, Islamic textbooks in Southeast Asia were written in Jawi, including translations of Arabic books and religious texts into the Melayu language (Versteegh, 2020b). This characteristic means that the study of Islam in the Melayu Muslim world has both universal and local elements. Similarly, in other Muslim regions, the local language often coexists with Arabic in religious education (Coluzzi, 2022; Jusoh & Mayah, 2018; Matheson & Hooker, 1988; Versteegh, 2020a). Traditional Islamic schools in Thailand began with teaching at the homes of religious scholars or Imams and then expanded to residences for students. These schools are closely related to the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, particularly from the southern region in the 15th century (Baka & Narongraksakhet, 2009; Narongraksakhet et al., 2023; Royal Gazette, 2011; Wae-u-seng et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, there are many differences in the context of Bangkok, Thailand. While the majority of Bangkok Muslims descend from Melayu ancestors, with around 200 mosques, they confront numerous changes in their identities, communities, and cultures. Bahasa Melayu is not common in their communication anymore. They lost their language and identities, except for their belief and ritual practices (Boonlue, 2016; Forbes, 1982; Scupin, 1998; Thongsawang, 2022). Traditional Islamic schools seem to be the last places that have preserved the Melayu language within Islamic education.

This study seeks to examine and analyze the contemporary roles of Arabic and Malay languages as they interact and embody dimensions of Muslim identity within Bangkok's Islamic educational context—an area that remains underexplored in Muslim and Islamic studies. Furthermore, it aims to propose alternative pedagogical approaches for enhancing the integration of both Malay and Arabic in teaching and learning practices at traditional Islamic schools, guided by theoretical framework in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework of This Study
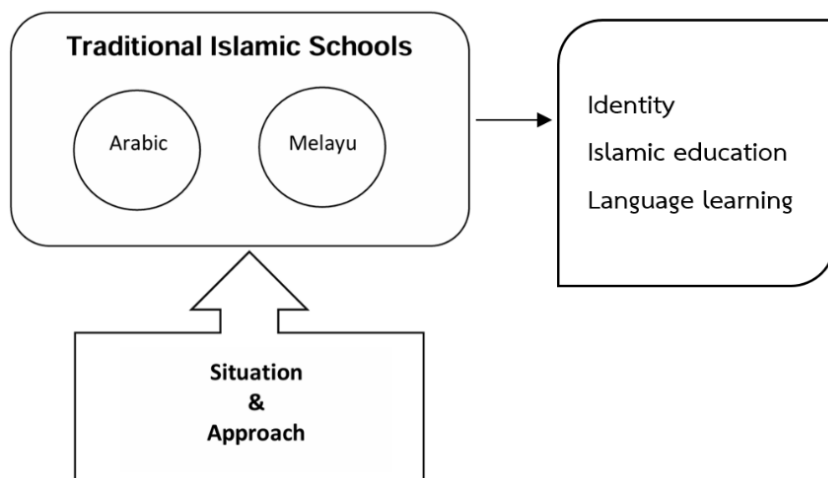
Source: Authors' analysis.

The objectives of this study are threefold: first, to examine the present condition of Malay and Arabic language use within traditional Islamic schools in Bangkok; second, to analyze how these two languages function and interact in shaping both educational practices and Muslim identity; and third, to formulate pedagogical recommendations that can strengthen the role of Malay and Arabic in the teaching of Islam, ensuring their continued relevance in the context of Bangkok's Muslim community.

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach built upon an extensive review of relevant literature, documents, and prior studies. Data were gathered through field surveys comprising in-depth interviews with teachers, group interviews with students, and direct classroom as well as campus observations. The sample was determined by purposive sampling to ensure alignment with the study's aims, focusing specifically on traditional Islamic schools in Bangkok that employ both Arabic and Malay as mediums of instruction. The selected schools are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

The Details of Sample Schools

School	Location	Code
Ridwanun Islam School	Khlong Chan, Bang Kapi District	A
Masohatuddin 2 School	Saphan Sung, Saphan Sung District	B
Sasana Suksa School	Nong Chok, Nong Chok District	C
Phatthanakarn Ying Suksa School	Suan Luang, Suan Luang District	D
Imaarotuddin School	Pracha Uthit, Huai Khwang District	E

Source: Primary data. Authors' analysis.

The informants from those schools consisted of three teachers from each school, totaling 15 teachers, and five students from each school, totaling 25 students. The researchers used a semi-structured interview to gather information regarding the use of Melayu and Arabic in schools. The interview covered several areas, including the following topics:

a. The details of using Melayu and Arabic in teaching

b. The background of both teachers and students in learning Melayu and Arabic

c. Any overlap in the content of lessons (if present) between the use of Melayu and Arabic

d. Attitudes towards teaching Islam using Melayu and Arabic

e. The development of the use of Melayu and Arabic in the schools

f. Predictions regarding the future trends of using Melayu and

g. Arabic for teaching in the schools

h. Problems and recommendations

i. Other related issues.

RESULTS

The study will present the following three dimensions of traditional Islamic schools in Bangkok: 1) identity, 2) Islamic education, 3) language learning, and 4) alternative approach for traditional Islamic schools.

Identity of Bangkok Muslims

Traditional Islamic schools in Bangkok represent a cultural and Islamic intersection at different levels. They are part of the global

Islamic world through the use of Arabic Islamic textbooks and are linked to the broader Islamic world through further education in Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan. Simultaneously, these schools represent a regional aspect of Islam, displaying the Southeast Asian Islamic identity through the use of Melayu and the practices of the Shafiʾi school of thought. This connection extends to further studies in the Melayu world, such as Pondok education, which is renowned in Southern Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and other Southeast Asian countries.

In 1970, school A separated the Arabic and Melayu curricula for students to choose. Time consuming become a factor because older student (more than 20 years old) trend to study in Melayu comparing with younger students, an informant said:

"Islamic studies in Arabic take a long time, requiring further study in Arab countries, such as cultivating a coconut tree and waiting for the fruit. On the other hand, if you study in Melayu, it related to commonly practiced rituals, such as marriage and funeral ceremonies, it resembles planting a banana tree, which yields fruit more quickly."

Students in the sample schools still preserve certain aspects of Melayu identity, for example, the Melayu text book in the Shafi'i school of thought, and their uniform. Male students wear sarongs and kopiah hats, as do teachers who, even without a strict dress code, tend to wear sarongs, kopiah hats, or head wraps (saraban) to class.

Figure 2

Examples of Bahasa Melayu Books Written in Jawi Script

Note: The Photographs Taken by the Researchers on November 10, 2023

Figure 3

The Principal of Masohatuddin 2 School Distributes Donation Money (Zakat) to All Students

Note: The Photograph Taken by the Researchers on November 21, 2023.

It can be said that the strength of the Melayu culture in the region is reinforced when it complies with Islam. Most Muslims in Bangkok of Melayu descent, even after adapting to Thai society, try to preserve their Melayu identity, especially their identity as Melayu Muslims. This is evident among both adults who seek to learn Islam through the Melayu language and the younger generation who still value Islamic knowledge that is transferred in Melayu. An informant mentioned:

> *"The Arabic language is comparable to a rooster (male chicken), while the Melayu language is a hen (female chicken); both are essential for egg production. Similarly, in Islamic education, both Arabic and Melayu are necessary to understand Islam."*

Additionally, the content of Melayu textbooks is connected to practices related to the Shafi'i school of thought, which is widely spread throughout the Melayu world, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and other ASEAN Muslim countries.

Islamic Education in Traditional Islamic Schools

Traditional Islamic schools in Bangkok include boarding schools, where students live in dormitories provided by the school, and some may need to cook for themselves for certain meals or take turns preparing meals for all students. Some schools have dormitories for both male and female students, such as school E, while others provide accommodations only for male students, such as schools A, B, and C, except for school D, which is a female school. As a result, students live at the school 24 hours a day.

Figure 4

The Student Dormitory (Left) and the Sasana Suksa School Building (Right)

Note: The Photograph Taken by the Researchers on November 24, 2023.

These schools set additional teaching hours outside regular class time, aligning their schedules with prayer times. For example, students may have study sessions after the Fajr prayer in the early morning, the Maghrib prayer in the evening, and the Isha prayer at night. Students' time is fully structured within the framework set by the school, with a focus on studying Islam full-time, similar to traditional Pondok learning systems. The principal of school B explained:

> *"Studying through a formal, structured curriculum — such as in schools or universities — can be compared to traveling by airplane: it is fast and direct, and arrives quickly. In contrast, traditional education is like traveling by camel: the journey is slower, but it offers more experience along the way. Both approaches ultimately lead to the same destination, but the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences gained along the way are different."*

He also said that he personally spent 14 years teaching the book I'ānatu al-Ṭālibīn (إِعَانَة الطَّالِبِيْن) from the first page to the last. This indicates that the value of the traditional teaching style still remains.

Moreover, each school has its own approach to extracurricular lessons. These may include repeating the content learned in class, studying additional subjects outside the regular timetable, or engaging in supplementary textbook studies under the guidance of an expert teacher in a specific subject. Each institution has a different arrangement for setting extracurricular lessons, reflecting a variety of teaching methods. It can be observed that some schools focus on language skills, such as teaching Arabic grammar in the morning, while others offer lessons in the early evening.

In general, most schools in the sample group tended to schedule subjects that required memorization during the morning sessions. This may include Islamic religious texts or other subjects that require concentration and repetition. The varying programs highlight how each school organizes additional learning time based on its educational priorities and the needs of its students.

Figure 5

Teaching Sessions After Prayer in Imaarotuddin School

Note: The Photograph Taken by the Researchers on November 14, 2023.

Extracurricular teaching often uses well-known and widely accepted older textbooks to ensure that students engage with authentic texts. These textbooks, which are respected for their historical and educational value, provide students with opportunities to study original sources. In contrast, the materials used in the classroom may consist of instructional documents or textbooks created specifically for each school. This system allows students to deepen their understanding of a subject through trusted and confident sources.

Language Learning

The traditional Islamic schools in the sample group emphasized Arabic language skills over Melayu. This can be observed in Arabic language courses, which cover all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For example, the Arabic conversation subject (الْمُحَادَثَة) covers speaking and listening skills. The subjects related to reading are divided into comprehension reading, such as literature (الْأَدَب) and comprehension reading (الْمُطَالَعَة), as well as subjects related to pronunciation, such as Tajweed (التَّجْوِيْد), which can be compared to Arabic phonetics but focuses on the correct pronunciation of the Qur'an. Additionally, there are subjects on rhyme, such as recitation and hymns (الْمُرَتَّل وَ الْأَنَاشِيْد). In the writing skills category, there are several subjects, including sentence construction (الْإِنْشَاء), filling in the blanks (الْإِمْلَاء), and sentence formation (التَّكْوِيْن).

Figure 6

*Examples of Arabic Textbooks from Ridwanun Islam School*

Note: The Photograph Taken by the Researchers on November 13, 2023.

In contrast, the Melayu language subjects not only have a smaller proportion but are also not separated into specific language skills. Teaching focuses on reading and translation, as they are based on classical textbooks, focusing on content, not language skills. However, some school try to improve Melayu language skills by teaching Rumi Melayu (Melayu with Latin script) Some teachers, even when teaching Jawi Melayu, attempt to compare the reading, spelling, and vocabulary with Rumi writing. Nevertheless, this comparison is only applicable to basic vocabulary and sentences and cannot be fully extended to the entire content. Melayu exams were conducted through reading and translation, where the instructor randomly selected a passage from the textbook for the student to read and translate in a one-by-one examination.

Figure 7

Rumi-Script in Blackboard for Teaching
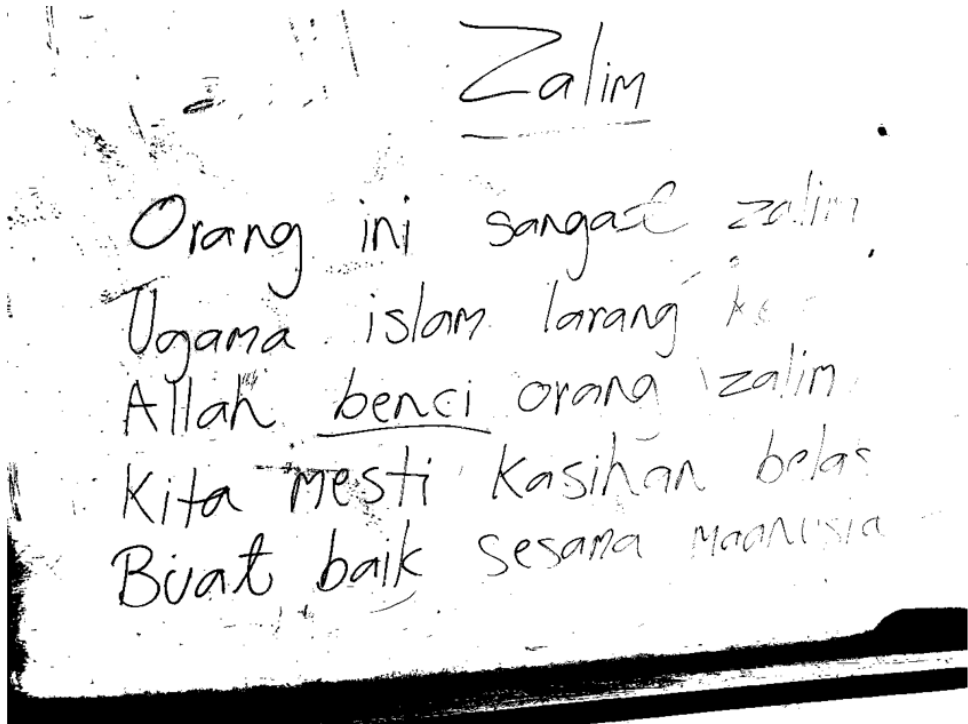
Note: The Photograph Taken by the Researchers on November 13, 2023.

In the past, Islamic education used Bahasa Melayu textbooks alongside Arabic. The Arabic parts were separated as the main texts (المتن), which students would read aloud or memorized. These Arabic texts include prayers (الدعاء), remembrance of God (الأذكار), verses from the Qur'an, and Hadith of the Prophet (النصوص). These texts were studied either for comprehension or to be used in religious rituals such as prayers, funerals, and weddings. The Melayu Jawi language can appear in the form of explanations (الشرح) or footnotes (الحاشية) to complement the content and provide additional details.

The data indicate that teaching Bahasa Melayu or Jawi is seen as a cultural preservation because it is considered the root of the Muslim

community in Bangkok, who are of Malay descent. As teaching aims to conserve and maintain the values from past generations, this impacts the teaching styles, which rely on classical textbooks and emphasize reading and translation for understanding. This method also affects assessment, as final exams focus on vocabulary, reading, and translation. The teacher randomly selects material from the textbooks used during instruction.

In contrast, Arabic is a source of knowledge about Islam, past and present. Over more than 1,400 years of Islamic history, standard Arabic (الْفُصْحَى) has served as a medium for knowledge transmission. Interestingly, the form of Standard Arabic used for centuries is the same as that used today. This has resulted in a large number of Arabic books and textbooks, both old and new, that students can access today, as teachers can choose from them for their lessons.

Moreover, some content must be taught in Arabic and cannot be replaced by the Malay-Jawi language, such as the subject of Al-Qur'an. Every school in the sample group teaches Al-Qur'an in Arabic, which includes memorization, correct pronunciation, and sometimes melodic recitation to enhance its beauty. External factors that directly affect Arabic language learning include opportunities for further study at the university level, most of which are located in Arab countries. The curriculum in the Arab world also influences the content of teaching because schools need to align their secondary education curriculum with the Arab world's curriculum, which has led to the adoption of textbooks from the Arab world in their instruction.

Alternative Approach for Traditional Islamic Schools

Based on the analysis of various factors related to the Arabic and Melayu languages, although the primary goal of the teaching and learning process is to provide knowledge about Islam and train students to live ethically according to Islamic principles, it is still

possible to develop students' language skills without conflicting with the objectives of traditional Islamic schools. The researcher believes that traditional Islamic schools can enhance students' language skills with the following suggestions:

a. Adjusting teaching methods and content to be more diverse. The direction of teaching can be adjusted by using examples from real-life situations and linking them to textbook content. Additionally, teachers can help students develop analytical and synthesizing skills by comparing and contrasting the content in different sections of the same textbook.

b. Teaching through classical texts is a characteristic of traditional Islamic schools that cannot be abandoned. However, instructors can modify the way content is presented. They could provide an overview of the content, highlighting the sections of the textbook being taught, summarizing the key ideas, and showing how the material connects with the previous content and the following sections.

c. Assessment methods should be modified to focus more on language skills, for example, by increasing the proportion of oral presentations in Arabic and Bahasa Melayu. For written exams, the focus could shift from memorization to summarizing content in the student's own writing. Language content should not be separated into distinct parts; one exam can be used to evaluate multiple related language subjects simultaneously.

d. Utilizing a wider range of teaching media: If the content is from well-known traditional textbooks, the teacher can act as an instructor to source and suggest additional channels for the students. For example, the teacher might provide videos of lectures on these old texts from scholars in both the Melayu and

Arab worlds. Students can watch these videos on their mobile phones or central television screens. Teachers do not necessarily need to take on this task themselves. They could teach certain sections while allowing students to take responsibility for the rest through suggested channels.

e. If it's not possible to extend class time for certain subjects, such as Melayu language (both Jawi and Rumi), the teacher could supplement them with additional study materials outside of class time. This could include preparing relevant resources for students, such as summarized content, a vocabulary list, and common sentence structures from supplementary materials provided outside of class.

f. Promoting academic language activities such as peer teaching between senior and junior students and problem-solving discussions. However, the content should not be based solely on rote memorization. The activities should encourage participants to use language skills in various forms, such as Arabic debate, storytelling in Bahasa Melayu, writing descriptive essays about classroom tools in Rumi, or summarizing lessons in the Jawi script.

g. Creating a learning environment that promotes language acquisition. For example, the use of Arabic or Melayu in announcements should be increased.

h. Develop academic resources. This could include various forms of resources, such as translating basic textbooks into Thai for beginner students, summarizing content in their own textbooks. and compiling lectures in audio or video files for students to review or share with interested outsiders. These resources should be continuously developed and be an ongoing objective for every school.

In summary, the suggested approaches for Arabic and Bahasa Melayu in traditional Islamic education in Bangkok can be adapted from existing practices in some schools but should be further encouraged and expanded. For example, increasing the teaching of Melayu Rumi to improve Malay language skills, using foreign languages within the school environment (such as signage and announcements), which is already partially present in all the sampled schools, and further developing academic resources that some schools have created. These areas should be promoted and continuously developed in a tangible manner.

Figure 8

Annual Event of Sasana Suksa School

Note: The Photograph Taken by the Researchers on December 5, 2023.

DISCUSSION

The context in Bangkok is different from that in the Southen of Thailand, which leads to dynamics that are unlike the findings in previous works (Baka & Narongraksakhet, 2009; Kuakul et al., 2021; Maoti, 2014; Wanglee, 2013). Most Islamic schools in Bangkok rely on community support through charitable donations, allowing them to maintain their status as non-formal schools with the freedom to determine their own curriculum and management. In contrast, the majority of schools in the southern region adapted to become formal private Islamic schools as a result of an earlier government campaign to modernize traditional pondoks (Aree & Rahman, 2016; Binsaleh & Binsaleh, 2021; Lateh et al., 2024; Liow, 2004; Yukhong et al., 2019).

However, this freedom comes at the cost of not receiving government support. Therefore, traditional Islamic schools must raise their own funds, often through donations from wealthy members of society via zakat (compulsory charity) or sadaqah (voluntary charity), or by organizing annual events. Traditional Islamic schools in Bangkok still take advantage of local resources, such as easy access to various forms of formal education, including vocational schools and higher-education institutions. For parents, sending their children to live and study at a traditional Islamic school is seen as a favorable choice because students are immersed in a religious environment, can perform religious duties such as praying and fasting, and receive moral education to live according to Islamic principles. Additionally, they still afford time to study in formal institutions, depending on their interests. Parents do not feel that their children are too far away from home because they can return during weekends or school holidays, and it is convenient to pick them up or drop them off because the school is located nearby. These are specific contextual factors of Bangkok, which make the dynamics of traditional Islamic schools in the area distinct from those in other regions.

This study helps expand the image of the Malay identity in Bangkok for Muslims, as discussed by previous studies (Jory, 2007; Phoborisut, 2008; Roux, 1998; Roy, 2016). This also confirms the relationship between language and identity, as mentioned by Rovira (2008) and Alshehri (2023). In terms of traditional Islamic schools, it broadens the perspective of Islamic education in minority Muslim more than management systems, as suggested by previous works (Abbas, 2017; Adawiyah & Zamaluddin Z., 2016; McAndrew et al., 2010; Niyozov & Pluim, 2009; Sahin, 2018; Salleh et al., 2011). Some schools insist on retaining traditional methods in teaching, learning, textbooks, and transferring to students as previously received. Consequently, any recommendation or suggestion should consider traditional value conservation together with learning development.

This research is part of an effort to understand Muslims in Bangkok within the specific context of traditional Islamic schools. The overlapping and various identities still require research and exploration from diverse academic fields to better understand both ourselves and our members in a multicultural society. In addition, the interaction between global and local Muslim languages in other regions still lacks research. Hence, it is necessary to fill this academic gap from a holistic perspective.

CONCLUSION

The interaction of Arabic and Bahasa Melayu coexists as a medium for teaching Islamic studies. However, Arabic and Bahasa Melayu have different statuses in traditional Islamic schools. Arabic serves a specific purpose, namely, learning Islamic knowledge, similar to a foreign language, as it involves language skills. On the other hand, Bahasa Melayu, in both Jawi and Rumi scripts, holds different conditions. Melayu in the Jawi script is considered a cultural-preservation tool. It may contain some content related to Islam, but

that is not the primary goal. The study of Jawi Melayu cannot be counted as learning a foreign language because the language used is a classical version that is not related to daily usage, both in spoken and written forms. However, Jawi Melayu still holds value as a source of Islamic knowledge, similar to Arabic. Nevertheless, Melayu in the Rumi script is not tied to cultural aspects or religious content but is treated as another foreign language.

The teaching of Arabic and Bahasa Melayu is influenced by various factors, including the language context, factors from the learners and teachers, and external factors such as further education abroad. Traditional Islamic schools can develop Arabic and Melayu language skills, both in Jawi and Rumi scripts, for students, providing them with an advantage in utilizing these languages for communication and career purposes, in addition to imparting Islamic knowledge. Both Arabic and Bahasa Melayu play significant roles at the international level. Enhancing students' language skills is in accordance with the identity of traditional Muslims; furthermore, it reinforces their understanding of Islam in contemporary contexts and strengthens their appreciation of their own culture.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: D.N. & P.Y.; Data curation: D.N. & P.Y.; Formal analysis: D.N. & P.Y.; Funding acquisition: D.N. & P.Y.; Investigation: D.N. & P.Y.; Methodology: D.N. & P.Y.; Project administration: D.N. & P.Y.; Resources: D.N. & P.Y.; Software: D.N. & P.Y.; Supervision: D.N. & P.Y.; Validation: D.N. & P.Y.; Visualization: D.N. & P.Y.; Writing – original draft: D.N. & P.Y.; Writing – review & editing: D.N. & P.Y. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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This study was approved by Faculty of Humanities, Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok, Thailand.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained before participants filled out the questionnaire for this study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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