EPISTEMIC STANCE PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN MALAYSIAN TERTIARY LEVEL ESL ISLAMIC BASED WRITTEN TASKS

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ABSTRACT

The commitment to correspond the Islamic teachings highlights the importance of Malaysian Muslims being proficient in the worldwide lingua franca English. Learners' approaches of expressing epistemic stance in the first language and target language differ depending on the discourse and context. English as a Second Language (ESL) studies in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are lacking in exploring English for *da'wah* (Islamic missionary) purposes, therefore, examining interlanguage writing of the Malay tertiary level learners specifically the pre-university students, in this genre is significant. The study aims to analyse the Malaysian Muslim tertiary level students' written English in expressing about Islamic related matters. The analysis focuses on the use of personal pronouns in communicating their Muslim perspectives of their religious teachings. An analysis on the use of epistemic stance-taking personal pronouns of 13 average Malaysian Muslim pre-university students' short paragraph compositions has been conducted. They had to write about the *du'a* (supplication) and about strengthening relationship within fellow Muslims. The analysis examines the structural and linguistic contextual features of the epistemic stance-taking personal pronouns employed. The personal pronouns most exploited in the writing are the plural first person 'we' and 'us'. The findings suggest that these students mostly could express their ideas about the *du'a* and Muslim bonding in English reasonably, albeit not utterly exceptional and as formal as most accessible English medium Islamic resources.

1.0   INTRODUCTION

English is currently the most used lingua franca worldwide. Islam promotes that this religion is for everyone globally. As Muslims are obligated to spread the Islamic teachings to everyone including themselves, using English as the medium is crucial in catering to the most global language variety used. In Malaysia as of May 2017, the current Muslim population is 61.3% ("Population of Malaysia 2017," 2017). With the Malaysian government education system having English subjects compulsory from primary to high school, most of these Muslim Malaysians have been exposed to English as a second language (ESL) lessons if they attended the government schools. The current English for specific purposes landscape mainly focuses on English for business communication, English for engineering, and English for medical purposes. In Malaysian higher learning institutions, most pre-university courses offer English proficiency subjects, since English is the medium of instruction. It is noted that using English to explain about Islamic related matters is not only restricted to matters of creed and metaphysics, but also about daily routine matters in life. Relating to this daily interactional social skills used, there is a need to focus on Islamic related matters in English proficiency lessons in specifically Islamic based learning contexts. In previous English for specific purposes studies, less have focused on analysing the discourses of English for Islamic matters or Islamic sciences. Related studies have generally focused on the challenges of teaching English in Islamic related contexts (Ahmad et al, 2014; Hidayati, 2016; Kusuma, 2017; Nashruddin, 2015). In this regard, the aspect of analysing the productive skills of the ESL students has to be explored further in detail in the context of Islam and multilingual societies.

The use of personal pronouns between different language systems may not be similar. In Bahasa Malaysia for example, in formal written genres, the first person singular pronouns 'saya', 'aku', and 'ku' are hardly ever used, whereas in the English medium especially American English, this use is acceptable. According to Feit and Capone (2013), in English generally the pronoun 'I' is used to express thoughts that the interlocutors have about themselves in relating to their surroundings and context. Besides that, the variety forms of second person pronouns in Bahasa Malaysia, 'kamu', 'awak', 'anda', 'engkau','kalian','kau', and 'mu'; as opposed to the

English 'you', highlights an apparent discrepancy. Associating to the nature of the native language and the target language is also to be considered in analysing the language learners' linguistic performance. Generally, unlike English, Bahasa Malaysia personal pronouns are not gender or subject-object bounded and some pronouns are pragmatically used in specific contexts (Norizah & Hasbi, 2005). Table 1 addresses the English and Bahasa Malaysia personal pronouns in broad-spectrum:

Table 1: English and Bahasa Malaysia Personal Pronouns.

NUMBER	PERSON	GENDER	ENGLISH		BAHASA MALAYSIA	
			SUBJECT	OBJECT	SUBJECT	OBJECT
Singular	First	Male/Female	I	Me	Saya / Aku / Ku	Saya / Aku / Ku
			Possessive Pronoun: Mine		**Possessive Pronoun:** (kepunyaan) Saya / Aku / Ku	
	Second	Male/Female	You	You	Anda / Awak / Kamu / Kau	Anda / Awak / Kamu / Kau / Mu
			Possessive Pronoun: Yours		**Possessive Pronoun:** (kepunyaan) Anda / Awak / Kamu / Kau / Mu	
	Third	Male	He	Him	Dia / Beliau	Dia / Beliau
			Possessive Pronoun: His		**Possessive Pronoun:** (kepunyaan) Dia / Beliau	
		Female	She	Her	Dia / Beliau	Dia / Beliau
			Possessive Pronoun: Hers		**Possessive Pronoun:** (kepunyaan) Dia / Beliau	
		Neuter	It	It	Ia	Ia
			Possessive Pronoun: -		**Possessive Pronoun:** (kepunyaan) Ia	
Plural	First	Male/Female	We	Us	Kami/ Kita/ Kitaorang	Kami/ Kita/ Kitaorang
			Possessive Pronoun: Ours		**Possessive Pronoun:** (kepunyaan) Kami/ Kita/ Kitaorang	
	Second	Male/Female	You	You	Kamu / Kalian / Kau orang	Kamu / Kalian / Kau orang
			Possessive Pronoun: Yours		**Possessive Pronoun:** (kepunyaan) Kamu / Kalian / Kau orang	
	Third	Male/Female/ Neuter	They	Them	Mereka	Mereka
			Possessive Pronoun: Theirs		**Possessive Pronoun:** (kepunyaan) Mereka	

Epistemic Stance refers to the process of speaker's or writer's proposition positioning of the message delivered to the receiver. Kärkkäinen (2003), mentioned that in defining epistemic stance, the notion of epistemic modality and *evidentially* is arguably complicated to explain. This is related to the issue of the level of the interlocutor's certainty of the proposition claimed. In this matter, besides the reliability of background knowledge, epistemic linguistic modality functions as a marker of evidence to reinforce the stance of the stance-taker. In academic writing, Hyland and Tse (2004) termed the epistemic stance markers as self-mentions which draw attention to the writer.

The objective of this study was to identify and explain Malaysian pre-university ESL learners' usage of personal pronouns in expressing their views in Islamic related matters. The lexical and grammatical errors of the participants' compositions were however not the scope of the analysis. The study aimed to answer the following research questions: 1) what are the personal pronouns used by the Malaysian pre-university ESL learners to express their Islamic related ideas? 2) what are the syntactical patterns of the personal pronoun usages identified?

2.0   EPISTEMIC STANCE-TAKING AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Recent studies focusing on epistemic modality have included comparisons between different languages in their epistemic stance markers and epistemic stance-taking in different discourses. Analysis of epistemic stance expressions on university lectures and on web-mediated genre of TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talks showed high percentage of the first person pronoun 'I' usage in the corpora (Caliendo & Compagnone, 2014). Compared to written discourse, this occurrence of 'I' usage has been apparently evident. Past studies of epistemic stance in written communication also have included comparisons of stance expressions in beginner and advanced academic writing (Aull & Lancaster, 2014) and English learners' use of hedges in expressing arguments in their writing (Yüksel & Kavanoz, 2015).

In scientific writing, Salzar et al. (2013) found that for both English and Spanish written discourse, less authority has been present in explaining scientific procedures in medical papers, while on the other hand, in mathematical explanation authors have tended to demonstrate more use of personal pronouns in guiding readers to logical mathematical explanation. Applying the systemic functional approach, Yang et al. (2015), analysed epistemic modality forms and functions in medical research articles. The study analysed English medical articles, claiming that stance orientation of the writers has been mainly provisional, restrained and factual.

Harrington and Pérez-Leroux (2016), analysed the subjunctive and subject pronoun realization in the Spanish norm of expressing 'I don't believe'. The study claimed that the use of this epistemic marker in Spanish depends on the pragmatic context. This study however only focused only on one group of speakers; the educated urban Hispanic community across the world. Sociolinguistically, range of other groups of Hispanic speaking community and second language learners could also be focused. Wulff et al. (2014), mentioned that they found less recurrence of using first person pronoun to indicate epistemic stance among German learners compared to the Spanish learners of English. They indicated that the L1 system of the L2 learners signifies an influence in second language pragmatic competence. Kranich (2016) particularly studied pragmatics and translation between English and German concentrating on epistemic modality and communicative styles. In relating to the bilingual background of the Malaysian Muslim ESL learners, it is also important to further delve in the area of translation studies in researching the pragmatics of epistemic modality between Bahasa Malaysia and English.

3.0   METHODOLOGY

This paper adapted the qualitative framework approach in analysing the written discourse of 13 average Malaysian Islamic pre-university students who were majoring in Islamic Studies. During the conduct of the study, these 18 to 19 year-old students were currently in their first semester. The participants of the study have been exposed to English as a second language officially for more than 10 years. Their English proficiency level during the study has been within the A2

CEFR scale. Their native language has been Bahasa Malaysia, however the specific Malay variety varies from the Northern Malay dialect to the Kelantanese and Terengganu Malay dialect. All of the Muslim participants have been educated in Islamic high schools before pursuing their pre-university studies. Besides English proficiency subject, they have enrolled in other core Islamic studies subjects and Arabic proficiency in Arabic, and Introduction to Computer subject in English. Even though the learning institution's medium languages of teaching and learning have been English and Arabic, Bahasa Malaysia has also been used in class since most of the discourse participants during the study were Malays, or at least could understand Bahasa Malaysia.

The participants were instructed to write paragraph elaborations on Islamic related matters in English. The topics of the short paragraph elaboration were 1) Muslims should always perform the *Do'a* (supplication) to Allah s.w.t. and 2) Islam encourages Muslims to strengthen their bond and relationship with fellow Muslims. The analysis focused on identifying and quantifying the use of personal pronouns. The identified excerpts of the types of personal pronoun usage were then analysed further in structure and semantically. The validity of this qualitative written discourse analysis was fortified via the Wordsmith corpus analysis tool.

4.0   FIRST PERSON SINGULAR PRONOUNS VS. FIRST PERSON PLURAL PRONOUNS

The analysis of the study focused on specifically English personal pronouns used in the compositions of the Malaysian Islamic pre-university ESL learners. The personal pronouns categorised were; first person singular pronouns (I, me, mine), first person plural pronouns (we, us, ours), second person singular and plural pronouns (you, yours), third person singular pronouns (he, him, his, she, her, hers, it) and third person plural pronouns (they, them, theirs). The results in percentage by category as shown in Diagram 1, illustrate that the most applied personal pronoun is the first person plural pronoun 56%, the third person plural pronoun coming next by 21%, then the third person singular pronoun by 18%, subsequently the second person pronoun 4%, and the least 1% is the first person singular pronoun. Supplementary details of each pronoun usage percentage are illustrated in Diagram 2.
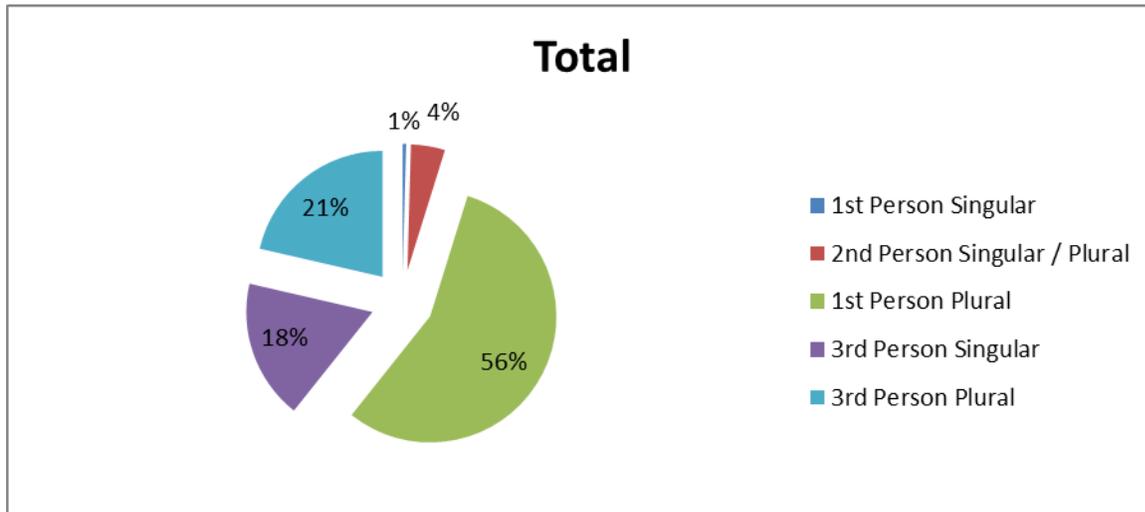
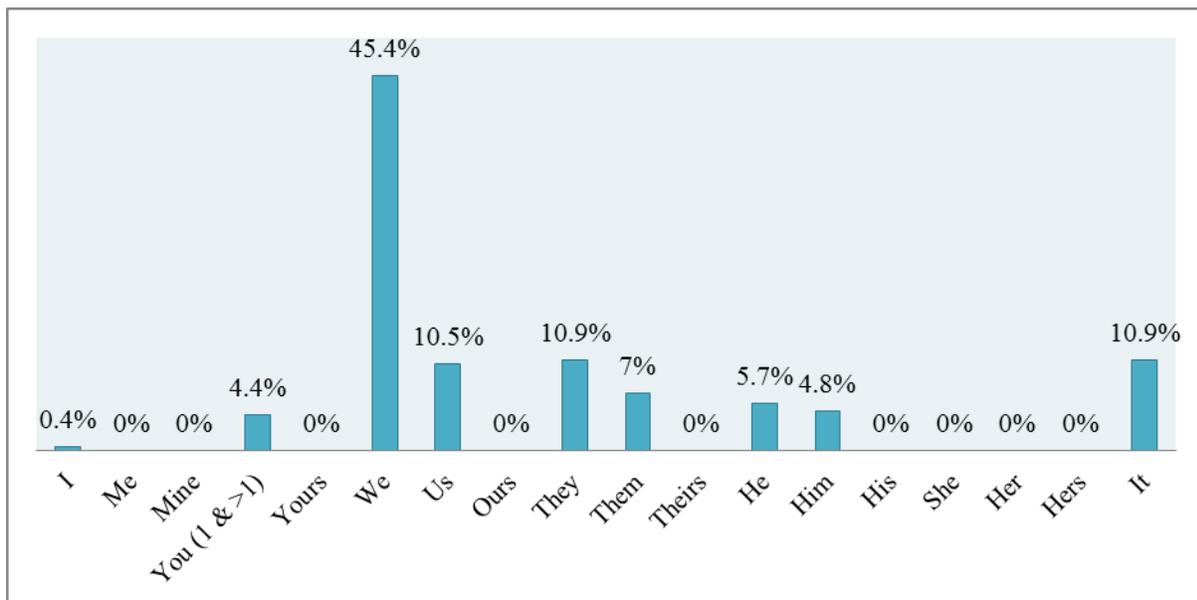Diagram 1: Percentage of Personal Pronoun Usages by Category.

Diagram 2: Percentage of Personal Pronoun Usages.

In Yüksel and Kavanoz (2015), Turkish ESL students displayed high use of hedges in expressing their ideas in academic writing style. The L2 students' high use of hedges reflected their mitigating style, which has been identified similar to the native speakers of English. Hedges were used in their academic writing to appear less offensive. Relating to this study, the high

usage of the first person plural personal pronouns in the participants' writings may be pragmatically related to the context of the discourse. The Malay Muslim ESL participants had to express a subject matter which has been simultaneously personal and universal to them. This choice of epistemic modality has not reflected less confidence in asserting their stance, but rather the first person plural personal pronouns were opted to reflect ideas that were to be universally common and collective. From the findings, it is indicated that the authority of the writer and the reader was intended to be shared; unlike in scientific writing where writers display less authority (Salzar et al. (2013).

5.0 SYNTACTICAL PATTERNS OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN STANCE EXPRESSIONS

As mentioned by Caliendo and Compagnone (2014), the use of the first pronoun 'I' in written discourse compared to spoken discourse has been exceedingly meagre. The 1% first pronoun usage of the participants in this study confirms this statement, precisely not just applicable to the native speakers of English, but also to the second language speakers of English. The most used first person plural pronouns indicate that the participants included themselves as part of the receiver of the written message. This is corresponding to the fact that the participants were aware that they are also Muslims, and the written information was also intended towards them too. This usage in addition indicates audacity of the participants in reflecting confidence in their views shared. From the analysis, the following excerpt is the only exemplar of the usage of 'I':

> **Excerpt 1:** *Islam encourages Muslims to strengthen their bond and relationship with fellow Muslims.*(topic sentence is provided by the researcher) Yes, **I** support that statement because in al-Quran has mentioned about to strengthen their bond and also relationship with fellow Muslims.

In this usage of 'I', it is preceded by the affirmative 'yes' and followed by the transitive verb 'support'. This indicates the reinforcement of the stance-taker in proclaiming the message intended. To further indicate this stance, the participant justified the claim of agreement by referring intertextually to the Quran.

The highest pronoun usages identified in the analysis categorised under the first plural pronoun is the subject pronoun 'we' (45.4%) and 'us' (10.5%). Most of the structure of using 'we' come in the form of having verb phrases recommending certain actions related to subject matter of discussion. The object pronoun 'us' is also used accordingly to indicate the interlocutor's presence in the context of the sentence. The following extracts from different participants reflect this subject pronoun 'we' + directive verb phrases:

> **Excerpt 2:** furthermore, **we** can support them with helped us with anything types.
> **Excerpt 3: We** need to respect each other so that **we** can also avoid misunderstand, disagreement and any other negative vibes between us.
> **Excerpt 4:** Moreover, **we** should always perform the Do'a to Allah because when **we** are in negligent so that invoke Do'a to Allah to bring us to the right path and also do the 'Taubat'.
> **Excerpt 5:** When **we** have many problem and reach one day **we** feel like nobody can solve it, the solution is **we** should perform the do'a but before it prayer first.

It is noted that several Noun Phrase (NP) 'we' instances identified in the analysis are subsequently followed by directive Verb Phrases (VP) in the form of modal verb + main verb as in:

> **we** can support : NP (we) + VP (can + support)
> **we** can also avoid : NP (we) + VP (can + avoid)
> **we** should always perform : NP (we) + VP (should + perform)

The participants' use of 'can' and 'should' modal verbs to suggest their point indicates compelling degree of confidence in their proposition. In the use of hedges in academic writing, native speakers of English also tend to prefer modal verbs the most (Yüksel and Kavanoz, 2015). This indicates that the participants' use of hedges in providing their advice is similar to the native speakers of English.

The findings suggested that the third person plural pronouns were employed to refer to the others, mostly referring to Muslims in general. Prior to the use of the pronouns, the noun referred to is mentioned as in these extracts:

> **Excerpt 6:** As a conclusion, as a good muslim, everything **they** do, anything **they** want, whatever **they** hope, we must back to Allah and always perform ou Do'a to Allah.

Excerpt 7: So that, when Muslims's bond are strong, **they** can together fight with non-Muslims wherever **they** live or wherever **they** go.

Excerpt 8: Anyway, Muslims always forget their creator till they full of pride to pray Do'a to their Creator. But, still the Creator still gives **them** leisure in the universe.

Excerpt 9: We must know relationship between muslim can help another muslim when **they** in difficult. Besides, Islam encourages muslim to strengthen their bond and relationship with fellow muslims because **they** do not inimreal or unfriendly with the other.

Pragmatically, this usage is parallel to the Bahasa Malaysia linguistic system except for the subject and object pronouns 'they' and 'them' which are both 'mereka' in Bahasa Malaysia. The participants' usages do not illustrate any impediment of their target language. This is the same for their use of the third person singular pronouns, where in Bahasa Malaysia there is no gender base for the pronoun 'dia' for 'he', 'him', 'she', and 'her'. There were no usages of the female third person singular pronouns in the analysis, but only masculine. Islam highlights that God is not anything similar to His creations, which means that God is gender-free. However, it is a conventional practice to refer to God as 'He' or 'Him' in the English translation of the Holy Quran. The participants' use of 'He' and 'Him' were all identified to refer to Allah or God.

> **Excerpt 10:** *Muslims should always perform the Do'a (supplication) to Allah SWT* (topic sentence is provided by the researcher) because **He** is everything to us. **He** is king in this world and **He** can do anything what **He** want. **He** can give and take back what **He** want and **He** know what is the best to us.

The remaining 10.9% of third person singular pronouns used is the pronoun 'it'. Most of the usages refer to the subject matter of the paragraph elaborated or to any ideas mentioned in the context of the sentence.

> **Excerpt 11:** It is because the Do'a to Allah is very important for Muslims.

However there are instances of using 'its' instead of 'it is' in the analysis of the participants' compositions. This nonetheless could not be generalized as their overall pattern of using 'it'.

The use of 'you' which is a diminutive portion of percentage in the analysis was contributed majorly (70%) by one participant. The following extracts were written by the same participant:

Excerpt 12: Never give up and upset what happen to **you**, remember Allah always with **you** and **you** are never alone when people not be around with **you**.

Excerpt 13: Second, **you** have to be honest in any situation or person. To strengthen their bond and relationship with fellow Muslims **you** have to be honest although is hurt because try not lies something. Then, usual to communicate each other for not be misunderstanding or else. Communicate is important too in any relationship because from that we know each other and can improve our relationship and bond. Lastly, we have to practice and complate to each other for long relationship. Never give up when **you** are in problem, keep calm and solve the problem.

This choice signifies that the participant's style of writing is directed to the readers or receivers in a straightforward manner. However, the use of 'you' can also indicate that the sender is also addressing to himself or herself. This again signifies that the participants' epistemic proposition is communicated in an inclusive manner where the sender is also the receiver of the intended message.

6.0   CONCLUSION

From the overall analysis of the study, it is construed that the Malaysian pre-university ESL learners exhibit usage patterns of epistemic stance-taking personal pronouns that are not excessively dissimilar to the native speakers in their writing. This is justified by the proper pragmatic use of the personal pronouns in the precise context. The high percentage of first person plural pronouns indicate that the participants were attentive that they were writing about subject matters that have been inclusively related to them as Muslims and have been related to the idea of solidarity. In addition to academic and professional genres, this study suggests that ESL lessons in Malaysian higher learning institutions should also include subject matters that are related to the Malaysian Muslim ESL learners' daily context in general. In the Malaysian Muslim context, Islam universally is to be practised anytime, anywhere and by anyone. The idea of including Islamic based matters in ESL lessons is to encourage and promote long-life universal use of English, not just restricted to academic and professional purposes. For in depth continuation of this study, spoken discourse of the same participants on the same topic should be analysed. Comparison of the spoken and written discourse could provide a more detailed explanation on this matter. Further studies on epistemic stance-taking approaches of Malaysian

Muslim ESL learners should focus on how they express their views about more sensitive issues related to Islam, specifically issues that have varying respective opinions.

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