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Madrasas and English Language Teaching

by

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The English language has become a ubiquitous entity around the world. Acknowledged as the lingua franca of modern times (Seidlhofer, 2013), English is also considered the language of business, technology, and development worldwide (Rao, 2019). It is not surprising, then, to find that English inhabits many social and educational contexts around the world. Further, due to its eminent connection with modernity and progress, English is also permeating into social and educational spaces that were previously considered out of bounds or even unwelcome. Such spaces are Madrasas (sometimes spelled Madrasah), which are educational institutions in the Islamic world, traditionally focusing on teaching Islamic subjects such as the Qur'an, Hadith, and Arabic language. Madrasas, which are rapidly proliferating in many Islamic countries, such as Bangladesh (Golam & Kusakabe, 2020) and Indonesia (Nashruddin, 2015), have begun to improve their curricula, recognizing that their current educational system does not meet the demands of the job market in the contemporary world (Nehal et al., 2016). This educational update requiring the integration of concepts considered contradictory to Madrasas schools' perspectives, such as the teaching and learning of the English language, has been referred to as 'traditional-modern education,' and is necessary to

"promote competitive graduates in the globalization era" (Rohman et al., 2023, p. 1).

Despite the significant role that Madrasas play in the educational landscape of many Islamic countries, their engagement with English language teaching (ELT) remains a largely invisible and unacknowledged domain within the broader teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) community. This oversight not only diminishes the understanding of ELT's global diversity but also overlooks the nuanced challenges and opportunities that teaching English in these religious educational institutions presents. The emergent interest in incorporating ELT within Madrasas underscores a pivotal shift toward blending traditional Islamic education with global communicative competencies. This evolution is propelled by a growing recognition of English's critical role in accessing broader educational, economic, and social opportunities in the globalization era. Consequently, exploring ELT in the context of Madrasas is not merely an academic curiosity but a pressing issue that mirrors the complex interplay between language education, cultural identity, and global integration. Thus, in this article, we introduce and explore ELT in Madrasas by responding to two main questions: Why is ELT in Madrasas an emerging issue in our field today? and

What are the implications of ELT in Madrasas? We end our discussion with considerations on how to move forward with this conversation.

Our Positionalities and the Origins of Collaboration

To provide transparency and enrich our readers' understanding of our perspectives, we begin by sharing our positionalities and the origins of this collaborative project. By disclosing our respective cultural, educational, and professional backgrounds, we aim to highlight the unique lenses through which we approach the complexities of English language teaching in Madrasa settings. This personal context underscores our commitment to this project and illustrates how shared values and diverse experiences shaped our partnership and friendship. The origins of this manuscript and our ongoing collaboration trace back to January 2022, when Luis Javier was invited by the U.S. Department of State's English Language Program (ELP) to participate in a potential project as an English Language Specialist. Following a detailed selection process, he was appointed to lead a two-week virtual teacher training for Madrasa English language teachers in Pakistan, marking his initial encounter with this unique educational context. This first engagement paved the way for three subsequent projects with the ELP in Pakistan, during which he met Yasir, who served as his in-person counterpart during the January 2023 training. Our partnership and friendship grew from a shared commitment to illuminating the often-overlooked experiences of Madrasa English teachers. We provide this context to clarify our positionalities, illustrating how such intercultural collaborations can foster deeper insights into coexistence, mutual understanding, and the evolving role of English within religious educational settings.

Yasir, originally from an ethnic Pashtun background in Pakistan, brings cultural and linguistic connections to his work with Madrasa teachers. His upbringing within Pakistan's secular education system, where he studied English language and literature, later complemented by his doctoral studies in TESOL in the U.S., has equipped him with a multifaceted perspective on language teaching.

During the Madrasa workshops, Yasir's fluency in Pashto and Urdu allowed him to engage deeply with participants who share these linguistic backgrounds. His onsite role, which included shared meals and accommodations with the teachers, fostered a sense of community and trust, enhancing his understanding of the unique challenges within Madrasa education. This close interaction allowed Yasir to see the intersection of faith and education in these teachers' lives. His ability to navigate these cultural and linguistic nuances facilitated a bridge between Madrasa teaching practices and broader educational frameworks, enriching his approach to supporting English language instruction within this distinctive context.

Luis Javier, born in La Habana, Cuba, has a background marked by navigating religious expression within a strictly secular school system, an experience that shaped his understanding of educational spaces and the role of ideologies in education and society. Raised in the Yoruba faith, he often encountered restrictions against openly expressing religious identity in Cuban schools, which created early insights into the complexities of balancing cultural identity with educational expectations. This sensitivity to the intersections of faith, identity, and learning influenced his work with Madrasa educators, where similar tensions exist between religious and educational roles. Although his role in the Madrasa workshops was virtual, Luis Javier's teaching sessions were well-received, with participants engaging actively despite limited interaction. Many stayed in contact afterward, underscoring the value they found in the training. His journey across diverse educational landscapes, where religion and education intersect differently, gives him a unique lens for understanding Madrasa English teachers' challenges and opportunities as they navigate language learning in faith-based institutions.

Implications of ELT in Madrasas

Why is ELT in Madrasas an emerging issue in our field today?

To answer this question, we must begin by providing

a brief historical background of English in Islamic countries. The spread of English in many Islamic nations can be traced back to the colonial era, notably under British rule, where English was forcefully introduced as a language of administration, education, and commerce (Bolton, 2008). This colonial legacy established English as a symbol of power, prestige, modernity, and global connectivity (Bukhari & Cheng, 2017), influencing educational systems across the colonized world. However, as traditional Islamic educational institutions, Madrasas initially resisted the introduction of English and its associated ideologies, seeking to preserve their religious, cultural, and linguistic teachings amidst the encroachment of colonial powers (Zaman, 1999). Nevertheless, in the post-colonial context, the continued valorization of English for economic development and international diplomacy further cemented its role within the curriculum of Madrasas, marking a shift towards incorporating 'modern' subjects alongside traditional Islamic teachings (Rohman et al., 2023).

It is vital to point out that Madrasa teaching is different from Western pedagogy in its spirit, approach to the content, and cultural milieu. Juxtaposing the two learning styles can be the beginning of understanding how teaching English in Madrasas can be a challenge and a case of opportunity. Madrasas rely heavily on learning verbatim the Holy text—the Qur'an—with the purpose of receiving sawab, meaning reward for reciting the Holy texts. In addition, Madrasas teach mantaq (i.e., logic), fiqhah (i.e., school of thought), and also endeavor to incorporate the scripture into the daily life of every student by referring to the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him, shortly PBUH). However, different from Madrasa teaching practices, ELT has no sacred cows in the form of either curriculum or content. This means that ELT practices have relatively no limitations, as any discussion can take place in its domain and is open to criticality. In the context of English either as a foreign or second language in the outer and expanding circles (Kachru & Nelson, 1995), most of the Madrasas in Muslim countries would welcome ELT as a positive gesture; however, the issues arising at the intersection of education in

Madrasas and English can be of ideology.

A focused examination of the divergent pedagogical approaches is essential to effectively address the emerging issues at the convergence of Madrasa education and ELT. The core gap lies not merely in the content but in the underlying pedagogies that shape the teaching and learning experiences within these contexts. Madrasas, with their emphasis on rote memorization and the enrichment of religious faith, contrast with ELT's flexibility and critical engagement, operating from fundamentally different educational philosophies. Bridging this pedagogical divide offers a promising pathway to achieving a mutual understanding of diverse ideologies. The integration of ELT practices into Madrasas has the potential not only to equip Madrasa teachers with new teaching methodologies but also to foster a symbiotic relationship among faiths. By doing so, the effectiveness of ELT could be enhanced in these traditional settings, thereby opening opportunities for a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural and ideological perspectives. This initiative underscores the transformative power of integrating modern teaching and pedagogy at the heart of Madrasa education and ELT, paving the way for educational practices that respect and unite diverse communities.

What are the implications of ELT in Madrasas?

The exchange between Madrasas and the ELT community is mutually enriching, highlighting the unique insights and benefits each brings to the other. For example, with its roots in high-context cultures (Agar, 1994), Madrasas are more of a community learning seat than a mere educational institution, and they offer inexpensive boarding and lodging to their students who hail from poverty-stricken social classes. The students learn a way of life that carries some considerable values, like respect for their teachers, as teaching is considered a prophetic profession and highly revered. Respect here can be broadly perceived as a boost to the teachers' self-esteem, which can help mitigate burnout effects and can positively influence their social-emotional well-being. Another aspect of Madrasas' life is the inculcation of the concept of

charity among the community members who are encouraged to support the education of these students, hence the collective responsibility of the other-than-state actors to contribute to the well-being of the society. A further consideration is religious faith as an integral component of the Madrasa educational system. Although, as stated before, there are now efforts to align religious and worldly educational streams, the emphasis is still to equip the students with education about faith.

Considering these insights, it becomes apparent that integrating ELT into Madrasas could herald significant educational transformations. The convergence of ELT with traditional Madrasa pedagogies necessitates a comprehensive strategy that includes the development of tailored teacher professional development programs. These programs, focusing on contextual sensitivity, intercultural communication, and a blend of pedagogical approaches (e.g., traditional and digital), are envisioned as essential for facilitating this integration. Such an initiative would respect and preserve the unique identity of Madrasas, while also responding proactively to the evolving demands of global education. Further, it would extend Madrasas' ELT teaching beyond language acquisition, thereby preparing students for the nuanced challenges of international communication ever-present in the globalized world. This envisioned shift towards interactive learning could also stimulate educational innovation within Madrasas, potentially enhancing students' critical thinking and adaptability to the global job market. Ultimately, this adaptation has the potential to underscore the resilience of Madrasas and their role in producing well-rounded, globally conscious individuals.

Moving Forward

Madrasas are often recognized for their alleged role in promoting militancy, their involvement in the Afghan Jihad, and contributing to a local and global wave of terror in the post-9/11 era (Berkey, 2007). Certainly, a great deal has been discussed about Madrasas' political/religious aspects, but the

relationship between Madrasas and the ELT community remains less commonly explored. As recorded by Mahboob (2009) and Elyas & Picard (2010), the English language is currently accepted and has an important role in many Islamic countries' lives and educational systems; however, visibility is reserved for higher education and formal school settings. That is, as a field, our scholarly publications, academic discussions, and teacher preparation programs continue to be predominantly about speakers learning the English language through formal schooling and mainstream educational systems. With this article, we hope to push those antiquated, self-imposed boundaries that have been set in our field and recognize that English, as the lingua franca of the world, dwells—albeit with different intensities—everywhere, including non-mainstream, non-formal, and non-traditional institutions where English is taught from unique perspectives and contexts.

Regardless of the attention paid to them in ongoing dialogues in the field, Madrasas are part of the ELT community. As Madrasas strive to produce competitive graduates while navigating the delicate balance between preserving the religious and cultural ethos and embracing modernity, integrating ELT into their curriculum emerges as a compelling area of inquiry in our field. This confluence of traditional and modern educational demands illuminates the broader challenges of global English education, making the study of ELT in Madrasas a timely and significant contribution to the field. Thus, we exhort the academic community to use this article as a starting point for conversation at the intersection of Madrasas and ELT. In this context, the promotion of interfaith harmony through English teaching in Madrasa schools in diverse contexts, such as Pakistan, becomes a particularly poignant area of exploration, as it exemplifies how ELT can serve as a bridge, not only between languages but also between different faiths, fostering a greater understanding and respect among students from varied religious backgrounds.

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