

Challenges Faced by Malaysian Muslims' Deaf Community in Learning *Akidah*: Discussions and Suggestions

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Abstract

This article discussed on the challenges faced by the deaf in studying *Akidah*. The methodology used in this study is a qualitative approach where the primary data is gathered through observation and interview of several *Akidah* specialists, special needs education teachers and parents with deaf children. This findings then supported with secondary data obtained from records from relevant institution and past literatures. The results showed that there are many challenges faced by Muslims' deaf community in Malaysia particularly in learning and understanding knowledge related to *Akidah*. Several suggestions were also made and it is hopeful that this study will raise awareness of all parties, especially religious institutions, Ministry of Education (MOE), Social Welfare Department (JKM), special education teachers for Islamic education, BIM researchers in an effort to increase understanding and religious practices among the deaf in Malaysia.

Keywords: Special Needs, Deaf, Hearings Impaired, *Akidah*'s Concept

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1. INTRODUCTION

“O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has At-Taqwa [i.e. one of the Muttaqun (pious - see V. 2:2). Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware”.

(Al- Hujurat 49:13).

Allah has mentioned in the holy Quran that He did not differentiate between human despite of their races, tribes or nation but the only thing that matters that made them better than anyone else is *Taqwa*. This has showed that human should strive themselves in gaining strong faith and build a character of a righteous people. This is because Allah judgement is not based on wealth, face or people's ranking, but what is in his heart. Allah has also mentioned in Quran that He has created man as the best, most well created among His creation.

“We have certainly created man in the best of stature..” .

(Al- Tin 95: 4).

Akidah is the central component of *Taqwa*. It is the essence of life. If the main cord is shaky and unsound, it can cause the collapse of the doctrines and beliefs of Islam. Thus, strong faith would have profound impact on individuals in particular and society in general. The deaf are not excluded from the command of God in devoting themselves to Allah SWT and carry out all the commandments just like other normal person. (Hamdi Ishak, 2010).

The deaf people are compulsory to practice religion as well as understanding *Akidah* of Islam (Hamdi Ishak, 2010) as to what has Allah SWT mentioned, *“I do not make jinn and human beings*

except to devote themselves to Me”. (al-Dhariyat ,51 : 56). However, there are several challenges relating to the use of sign language which is the medium of communication of deaf people especially in understanding the Islamic terms (Siti Muhibah Nor, 2010; Hamdi Ishak,2010). Due to the problems encountered, it can affect the faith of deaf people. It will cause their understanding of religion to be distorted (Syar Meeze, 2017). Thus, the objective of this research is to analyze the challenges that cause the process of learning *Akidah* became tough and hard to understand by the Muslim’s deaf community in Malaysia and suggest several action that can be taken to address the issues raise.

This study is using a qualitative approach that used study case in order to analyze the situation faced by the community concern. A primary data were gathered through interviews from several experts including specialists in *Akidah* knowledge, special education teachers and parents with children that have hearing problems. The information is also supported by secondary data gathered from analyzing related documents and research from previous studies. The results of the data collection is categorized according to their themese and has been transcribed and read several times before they were interpreted. The information extracted form the data is then categorized according to the problem category.

2. CHALLENGES THAT FACED BY MALAYSIAN MUSLIMS’ DEAF COMMUNITY IN LEARNING AKIDAH

According to the syara’ debate, the deaf are accountable (*Taklif*) to accept and implement all religious claims (Ismail Kamus et.al., 2009; Hamdi Ishak et.at., 2010 & Mohd Huzairi Awang, et.al., 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to provide a comprehensive communication medium that covers all *Akidah* aspect to ease their understanding and practice of the knowledge in their daily life. However, there are some issues relating to the use of sign language especially in understanding the Islamic terms (Siti Muhibah Nor., 2010; Hamdi Ishak, 2010). Based on the findings, there are several barriers and challenges for the deaf community in understanding the concept of faith and implementing it as a way of life of a Muslim. Some of the challenges highlighted in the study are as follows:

2.1 Lack of terminology or sign language that related to Islamic terms especially *Akidah*

Preliminary observation found that the book of Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia (BIM) for volume 1 and 2 showed that there are only 30 types of sign language that are related to Islam (Bahasa Isyarat Islam, 2000; Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia, 2003). This shows that there are very few signs in Malaysia Sign Language (MSL) that related to religion which proves that deaf people may experience difficulty in receiving religious education and have poor understanding to the Islamic religion terms (Siti Muhibah Nor, 2010). In addition, researcher had referred to the book Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia (BIM): Isyarat- isyarat Islam which also serve as a reference for the deaf community and identified only 32 signs that are related to the *Akidah* knowledge. The lack of terms has cause problems for deaf people to understand the true concept of *Akidah*. Currently, the terms of the *Akidah* from Buku Teks Muallaf Selangor Ulum Sya’iyyah Tauhid that published by the Majlis Agama Islam Selangor (MAIS) is used as a reference since the module is in line with the basic level and requirements of the *Akidah* knowledge, however the sign language is still limited and does not covers all aspect of *Akidah*.

2.2 The use of words from other religion sign language as Islamic sign language

Most of deaf people have misinterpreted the use of sign language in the religion (Hamdi Ishak,2010). They have used the sign of other religion to replace the missing sign language of Islamic terms. Among the words used that are wrong in Islamic context are “Nabi Isa”, “Oh my god”, “God”, “God bless you”, “Kitab Injil” and “Maryam”. The misuse of these words causes them to become confused and the continuation of using other religion’s sign language is not suitable for the use of Islamic teaching which will affect their understanding against the true meaning of these words (Hamdi Ishak, 2010). For example, the sign for “Prophet Isa” is demonstrate through the sign of something pierced in the hands which bring to the meaning of Prophet Isa is crucified. This will cause a serious

misunderstanding of the *Akidah* of deaf Muslims about the Prophet Isa. Another example is the sign of “Angel”. Angel is demonstrate with the sign of wings like birds in most Western films while in Islam, the wings of Angel cannot be visualized since it is matters of the unseen which cannot be described by human senses (Shihab, 2012). Hence, it is wrong to visualize the wings of the angel like the bird’s wing or as angel shown in Western films. The confusion not only causes misunderstanding of the word used but it may also affect the aspect of *Akidah*. This is because one’s belief in something will affect their practices, especially when the belief involves religious aspects (Al- Ghazali. 1997; Robiatul Adawiyah, 2009; Nurul Asiah Fasehah, 2015).

2.3 The evolution of non- Muslim’s effort in expanding their religious sign language

As far as da’wah efforts for deaf Muslims is concern, it is very alarming to see religious preachers especially Christianity efforts to uphold and develop sign language. They are very considerate about deaf people and always strive to uphold and develop the sign language particularly relevant to Christianity and Bible. Their efforts have begun since 1982 and started in the United States by setting up an organization called Deaf Mission and has implemented the project of “The Bible: ASL Version” (Lianna, P., 2013). Through this effort, the sign language for the Bible has grown rapidly. Until now, there are various organization of sign language for the Bible established all around the world. According to the records from APSDA (Asia Pasific Sign Language Development Association) Bible translated to sign language since 2013. This has a profound effect on the deaf people who are Muslims. Somehow this effort affected the deaf Muslim and threatening their faith in Islam (Hamdi Ishak, 2010). This is because these Cristian preachers’ group are very friendly to the deaf people. In Christian mission, they also train Christian and Bible scholars among the deaf (Lianna, P., 2013). Comparing to the efforts in approaching the deaf community and developing the term in sign language, which led to the understanding, appreciation and practice of Islam among Muslim, Muslims association is far behind (Syar Meeze et al., 2014). If this problem presist, it will certainly cause many deaf people to be attracted in understanding Christianity than Islam. This happened due to poor attention of Muslim’s community towards religious consciousness among the deaf (Syar Meeze et al, 2015).

2.4 The Weakness Islamic Dictionary for the Deaf Muslim

Based on the observations, among the constraints of development of Islamic Sign Language is lack of references. Up till today, there is only one dictionary of Islamic Sign Language published by Qatar which produced as a result of the 1st International Forum of The Deaf Muslims which was organized in Doha, Qatar on 11 to 13 November 2013 (Zakarna et. al., 2013). However, there are needs of improvement since there is no alignment in content which is not suitable to the culture and way of life of deaf people in Malaysia and the sign for Islamic term especially on *Akidah* is insufficient. (Zakarna et. al., 2013).

3. DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, these issues and challenges highlighted have a significant impact on the deaf in learning *Akidah*. The study also explains that communication factors are the biggest issues faced by the deaf to learn the words and terms. This is because the Malaysian Sign Language (BIM) is the native language of the deaf (Wilbur, 2012). Therefore, the teaching and learning of *Akidah* knowledge using BIM to meet the needs of the deaf can provide them with understanding (Syar Meeze, 2017). Thus, it is crucial that we are able to engage, identify, understand and solve issues and challenges that limits their opportunities in learning *Akidah*, which will significantly impact their life. This is important because deaf people are also the creations of Allah that created to devote themselves and carry out the commands of God (Hamdi Ishak, 2010). They must learn religion since they are intelligent and not excluded from the obligation to accept the message and to study religious knowledge (Hamdi Ishak, 2010).

Syar Meeze Mohd Rashid, a lecturer in Special Education at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) argues that if these issues and challenges are not addressed, this may affect the religion practice and understanding of the deaf community on Islam as a whole (Syar Meeze, 2017). Lack of signs for religious terminologies especially *Akidah*'s terms has been a point of concern. This can cause the deaf to be drawn to and follow the teachings of other religions because their sign language is more comprehensive compared to Islam. This is based on a record from Wycliffe, a bible translation agency in Canada that stated that Bible has been translated into 25 types of sign languages in several Asian Pacific (Syar Meeze, 2017). This research has able to identify and propose few suggestions to overcome the problems and suggest support and effort to provide the best way for deaf people to understand *Akidah*'s concept. Suggestions are as follows:

3.1 Conveying religious to the deaf.

Based on the findings, the efforts to provide understanding of the concept of faith to the deaf are very small. Parents, teachers and preachers have serious communication problems with this community. This is because not all parents, Islamic teachers or preachers are fluent in sign language. Therefore, it is suggested that initiatives from various parties that are directly or indirectly engage with the deaf must maximize their efforts to learn sign language to facilitate communication between typical person and deaf. This proposal should be extended especially to the deaf parents, teachers and preachers. Currently, christianity is easily accepted by the deaf Muslims due to their smooth communication process. This should be a concern for every individual Muslim, especially those around the deaf community.

"...Looking at these, comparing to the efforts approach towards deaf and developing the term in sign language, which led to the understanding, appreciation and practice of Islam among Muslim, is far behind..." (Syar Meeze,2014).

"we need to have the efforts to help deaf people and it is important to bring benefits to the deaf communities..." (Encik Rashdan)

This effort should not only stop at learning the sign language, but efforts such as obligatory classes for the deaf, sign language interpreters during Friday sermons, religious talks and religious programs as implemented by various parties such as Negeri Sembilan Deaf Association (NESDA), Persatuan Orang Pekak Islam Malaysia (PRISMA), Persatuan Orang Pekak Selangor (POPS) and others should be supported and expanded in order to make this notion a success.

3.2 Set up the coordination of signs language in Islamic terms.

Based on the interviews performed there were many complaints about the sign language that did not conform to one term. This complicates the process of giving religious knowledge to the deaf.

"The use of these different sign languages can confuse students." (Teacher Aida, Special Education Teacher)

It is suggested that a special group of different authorities such as Malaysia Federation Of The Deaf (MFD), NESDA, PRISMA, special education lecturers, special education school teachers and the Ministry of Education is established to discuss on this matter to achieve consistency of signs for *Akidah*'s terms to assist deaf people.

3.3 Develop suitable signs for *Akidah* terminologies to facilitate teaching process.

Next, there should be an effort to carry out the process of building new signals for religious terms, especially in terms of *Akidah*. This is to facilitate the process of religious teaching where the focus is on strengthening the faith of the deaf. This suggestion is based on a problem shared by special education teachers who find it difficult to convey information due to the lack of signals for religious terms. They also expressed the difficulty in delivering knowledge on *Akidah* as they were mostly abstract and difficult to understand.

According to Cikgu Norhafizah, the deaf students are having a hard time to understand the religious terms, especially the terms of *Akidah*. To educate the deaf students they have to follow certain level of compliance with the language tools and use appropriate communication platform. She also encouraged to establish and expand the sign language for the terms of *Akidah* for the needs of teachers give explanation more effectively to the students in the teaching and learning session. Dr Wan Fazrul, who is one of the senior lecturers in the Faculty of Leadership and Management, USIM, has highlighted this matter as very important to all the people whether it is normal people or disability people (OKU). He also suggested that the basic terms in *Akidah* is identified and prioritized in developing the new sign language since it may not feasible to translate all terms in short period of time.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Akidah* is a mattres that accountable to all Muslims whether they were normal or disabled people such as those that are tested with hearings impaired. However there are many challenges faced by the deaf in learning and understanding *Akidah*. The challenges can be concluded into four main problems which are lack of sign language related to *Akidah*, the use of other religion terms to replace Islamic terms, the evolution of non-muslims sign language and the limitation of current Islamic sign language dictionary. Thus, this paper suggest that all parties should participated in approaching and conveying Islam to the deaf. In fact, a special task force should be establish to coordinate the existing terms and new terms should also be developed based on the term that has been identified as priority in teaching and learning *Akidah*. It is hopeful that this paper will help to ease the burden and challenges face by the deaf community in learning about Islam especially *Akidah*.

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