

# Students' perspectives on religious moderation: A qualitative study into religious literacy processes



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Research exploring how students develop their perspectives on religious moderation through reading and understanding the Qur'an is underexplored. This study aims to investigate students' religious literacy tenet as a process of constructing meaning about religious moderation from the verses of the Qur'an. The participants involved were three students with an excellent ability to read the Qur'an and who had a great interest in the study of the Qur'an. The data were collected through the process of reading the verses of the Qur'an and its textual and contextual translation. The results of this study indicate that students with high translation amendments (adding, removing and replacing words and phrases) tend to have more ability to interpret the verses of the Qur'an widely as a form of verbalisation of thoughts.

**Contribution:** This study provides clarification on student interactions, the interpretation process and the construction of the meaning of the verses of the Qur'an. Furthermore, the results of this study encourage lecturers to reconstruct the process of learning to read the Qur'an at the university level.

**Keywords:** Qur'an; religious literacy process; reading Qur'an; religious moderation; textual translation; contextual translation.

## Introduction

The literacy enactment in this study has a religious component, as it revolves around reading the verses of the Qur'an. Using the reader-response theory of reading from Rosenblatt (2018), this study attempts to frame religious literacy (RL) as a 'transaction' between students (readers) and the Qur'an (religious texts). Thus, this study focuses on the nature of student interaction and the process of interpretation of the scriptures (Heath 1982). Religious literacy is examined by identifying how students construct the meaning of the Qur'an. This understanding can inform how students are involved in constructing religious knowledge. In addition, the RL enactment in this study can show the practice and process of reading as part of the student experience interacting with the Qur'an. Anchored by this view, other studies have shown success in studying the clarity and quality of religious texts (Sullivan 2007), the Bible literacy strategy (Rackley 2015) and applying the scriptures to one's life (Rackley 2017), including recognising confusion in reading and constructing meaning (Rackley 2018).

Traditionally, religious literacy views the literacy process as a process of reading to produce knowledge. It exists to focus on the methods, means and practices of how to construct meaning (Rackley 2020). So the total view of literacy is the construction of meaning (Ruddell & Unrau 2013). This makes sense, given that reading comprehension is a core aspect of literacy. Reading is a complex process (Lee & Spratley 2010), and extracting knowledge from the Qur'an is much more complex. When reading, prior knowledge serves as a framework for processing and storing new information (Hodges et al. 2016). Verses-to-verses and verses-to-self connections are literacy process activities that connect readers with previous readings (textual meaning) and with their life experiences (contextual meaning) (Tovani 2004).

On the other hand, RL is also conceptualised as the acquisition of knowledge about religious beliefs and practices that can be used to understand religious diversity and promote harmony (Barnes & Smith 2015). Knowledge construction is a crucial principle of RL by describing RL as 'an understanding of religious concepts and practices and some understanding of the complexities, contradictions and challenges associated with religious traditions' (Conroy 2015). This view of the RL process informs the development of religious knowledge to create sensitivity to social and cultural contexts (Rackley 2014). In this study, students were faced with verses of the Qur'an that

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explain the prohibition against insulting other religions and acceptance of doing good to non-Muslims. From this RL incident, students were expected to be able to provide views on religious moderation based on the results of their reading and thinking processes. Although the Qur'an teaches peace and harmony, Muslims must honestly acknowledge the potential for Islamic teachings to be misunderstood and directed towards violence and radicalism (Hanafi 2007). Thus, this research will provide a middle ground for the debate in the broader community regarding the issue of the role of religious education in 'cohesive society' and 'extremism', which is increasingly worrying (Casson 2019; eds. Lövheim & Stenmark 2020).

In its various manifestations, the Qur'an occupies an important place in the lives of Muslims (Hanafi et al. 2019 and 2020; Skerrett 2014 and 2016). Although the current evidence shows the enormous influence of the Qur'an on personal and social life, no research, according to our knowledge, has critically engaged with how students develop their religious knowledge through reading and understanding the Qur'an. Thus, it is interesting to explore and provide empirical evidence about the tools, approaches and practices used by students to understand the meaning of the Qur'an for their social life. This study addresses the gap by examining in detail the process of reading the Qur'an from students. Findings from the study can help clarify and further reveal how students approach the Qur'an and provide an entry point for re-examining the RL development process at tertiary levels. Furthermore, the results of this study can encourage lecturers to rethink the process of learning to read the Qur'an at the university level.

## Research methods and design

The researcher plays a critical and vital role as a research instrument (Pezalla, Pettigrew & Miller-Day 2012). The main methods used in this research are data collection and analytical procedures, as has been done in similar studies by Rackley (2020). In order to maintain research standards, potential researcher bias and the reliability of research, two actions were taken based on the explanation of Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Patton (2015). Firstly, participants were selected using the purposive sampling technique and received their informed consent as ethical considerations. Secondly, as part of the primary method, thematic coherence was established during the data collection process, and the participants' religious literacy process and meaning construction during the data analysis process were described.

## Participants

The participants in this study were students from two faculties (the faculty of science and technology and the faculty of education) at Universitas Negeri Malang, who won a competition in the field of the Qur'an (Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an) for national level students in Indonesia. Participants received a direct invitation to participate in the study, and three students agreed to join. The three students were then

invited in writing via e-mail. This study focuses on three students on the grounds of completeness of the data and the most precise representation of religious moderation. The three participants were given pseudonyms. Robi is a 19-year-old male student from the science faculty, with a religious education background in Madrasah Aliyah and Islamic boarding schools. Siti is a 20-year-old female student from the faculty of education, a teacher at an Islamic boarding school with a religious education background who focuses on memorising the Qur'an (*tahfidz*) at the elementary education level. Hasanah is a 19-year-old female student from the science faculty with a religious education background in Madrasah Diniyah. These participants were selected based on their reading ability, knowledge and practical experience in the field of the Qur'an. Thus, these participants represent a targeted and information-rich sample (Maxwell 2013; Patton 2015).

## Interview

The interviews conducted in this study consisted of three sessions lasting around 45–60 min for each participant, depending on how the participants responded and the number of questions asked. The first interview was conducted to collect student background information, which lasted 5–10 min. Background information included gender, faculty, experience in religious schools and memorising the Qur'an. The second and third interviews were conducted to collect data related to students' ability to interpret verses of the Qur'an (verbalisation of thoughts), each lasting between 20 and 25 min. During the interview process, students would share their thoughts on religious moderation. Thus, these data would assess students' perspectives on religious moderation. For the second interview, participants would read a verse of the Qur'an about tolerance, which was chosen directly by the researcher as a mandatory verse, namely Qur'an 6:108, concerning the prohibition against insulting other religions. Meanwhile, for the third interview, participants had the right to choose one of the verses of the Qur'an that the researchers had provided; coincidentally, all three participants chose the first option, namely Qur'an 60:8, concerning doing good to non-Muslims. All translations and interpretations of verses refer to the Qur'an published by the Indonesian government (Kementerian Agama Republic Indonesia 2022).

The main questions of the interview:

1. According to the rules of tajwid, read fluently the verse of Qur'an 6:108.
2. Read one of the choices of verse (Qur'an 60:8, 10:99 or 5:48) fluently.
3. Translate the verse in the way that you find easiest, word for word, part by part or as a whole.
4. Try exploring your experiences and reflecting on these verses that you have read contextually.

## Data analysis

Data analysis consisted of two main stages, as follows.

### Stage 1: Examine the literacy process (textual meaning)

The examination of the literacy process focused on examining the students' interpretive process: whether every word, a fragment (part of a verse) or an entire verse later was translated textually. Specifically, researchers inquired about how they translated and what obstacles they encountered in this stage. During this analysis process, attention was also paid to (1) whether students added, deleted or replaced words in the translation process and (2) whether words were added, deleted or replaced to change the meaning of those words and verses. It is important to remember that additions, deletions and replacements of words do not always change the verses' meaning, so these two stages were needed. Labels were also provided for students' interpretation practices if students seem confused whilst translating.

### Stage 2: Examine students' perspectives (contextual meaning)

This stage was guided by an inductive constant comparison method (codes generated from data). This technique is commonly used in qualitative research (Leech & Onwuegbuzie 2007). This data analysis began with becoming familiar with the data. Researchers read the transcript to learn how students viewed religious moderation. Researchers, together with colleagues, individually cut some data into smaller meaningful parts called meaning units. This section was then labelled with a 'code', where similar pieces of data would be coded in the same way. After the coding process was complete, the researcher would consider some pieces that were not labelled to be included or excluded. Codes would be grouped according to similarities, and themes would be identified based on those groupings. Disagreements about the codes were resolved through discussion. The researchers returned to the data to review the previously coded sections and reviewed some literature to check the alignment of the coding results with the relevant research. As a final check, the researchers validated with a member check (Birt et al. 2016) and expert validation from the Islamic religious education department by asking them about the codes and themes generated. The member check was carried out by providing the findings obtained by the researchers to the participants to ensure whether the results of the study followed what they had conveyed during data collection.

## Results

### Students' religious literacy processes

The translation process carried out by students can be classified in three ways, namely translating per word, per part (chunk) of a verse and translation of the verse as a whole. The following is an example of how participants translated the selected verse of the Qur'an (60:8). Robi, the first participant, translated word for word:

'Laa yanha kumullah' [God doesn't prevent]

'anil ladziina' [from the person who]

'lam yuqaatiluukum' [not harm you]

'fid diin' [in religion or not fighting you in religion] (Robi, interview, 31 August 2021)

Siti, the second participant, translated part by part (verse snippet):

'Laa yanha kumullah' anil ladziina lam yuqaatiluukum fid diin.' ['Allah does not forbid you all to do good or just to those who do not fight in religious matters.'] (Siti, interview, 01 September 2021)

Meanwhile, Hasanah, the third participant, translated the verse after reading it in its entirety:

'Laa yanhakumullah 'an alladzina lam yuqaatilukum fid diin wa lam yukhrijuukum min diyaarikum 'an tabarruuhum wa tuqsituu ilaihim. Innallaha yuhibbul muqsithiin.' ['Allah does not forbid you from doing good to those who do not fight you in religious matters and do not expel you. Verily, Allah loves those who do justice.'] (Hasanah, interview, 02 September 2021)

The process of translating the verses of the Qur'an by the three participants was generally marked by additions, deletions and other changes. Of the three participants, Hasanah (the third participant) changed the translation the least during the interview process. However, Siti (the second participant) changed the translation without changing the more significant meaning. Meanwhile, Robi (the first participant) is the most prominent manifestation of the translation 'change' process. Each word and phrase omitted, added and replaced was counted as one change in this study. Each will be discussed in detail.

Siti changed the translated text once in the mandatory verse and three times in the optional verse. In addition to eliminating, Siti added and substituted words. During the process of translating 6:108, Siti added the word 'and' between the words 'basic' and 'knowledge' so that it read, 'they will later curse Allah by transgressing without foundation and knowledge'. In the selected verse, Siti omitted the word 'applicable' after the words 'or' and 'mu' in the word 'battle' in 60:8 so that it read, 'God does not forbid you all to do good or just to those who do not fight in religious matters'. From this translation process, it is also seen that this second participant added the word 'all' before the phrase 'do good' and substituted the word 'and' with 'or' before the word 'fair'.

Whilst translating the obligatory verse, Hasanah changed it once by adding the phrase 'which they have' so that it read, 'they will later curse Allah by transgressing without any basis of knowledge they have'. Whilst in the selected verse, Hasanah changed the text twice by deleting two phrases, namely 'and do justice' after the phrase 'you do good' and 'from your hometown' after the phrase 'expel you' in 60:8 to read, 'Allah does not forbid you from doing good to those who do not fight you in religious matters and do not expel you'.

Robi added transition words, removed and replaced words and phrases and tried to summarise at the end of selected

verses. Overall, the translation of the selected verse from Robi read thus:

'Allah does not prevent those who do not harm you in religious matters or do not fight you in religion and people do not expel you from your homes. Moreover, please do justice to them; indeed Allah loves those who do justice.' (Robi, interview, 31 August 2021)

Robi added the transition word 'and' to the additional sentence 'and please do justice to them' at the end in an attempt to smooth out the extra sentence, linking the ideas from the first part of this verse to the very end, and serving as a narrative link. Meanwhile, this additional sentence is added to understand the beginning of the verse and summarise it. Robi omitted the phrase 'you do good and act justly', so the translation only read, 'God does not prevent those who do not harm you'. The exciting thing was that Robi tried to eliminate this phrase and then brought it back as a summary at the end of the translation. Another exciting thing was that Robi repeated the translation to emphasise the meaning by the repetition of 'or not fighting you in religion'. Robi also substituted the word 'prevent' for the word 'forbid', 'harm you' for the word 'fighting you', 'issued' to the word 'evicted', the word 'home' for the phrase 'hometown' and 'like' for the word 'love'. Robi carried out this substitution with more colloquial and common language.

### Students' perspectives on religious moderation

In this finding, five points were conveyed by students related to religious moderation. The five points resulted from an inductive process during the data analysis process.

The first was the attitude of not judging others (including fellow Muslims) without a strong enough basis. Robi explained that:

'Muslims do not like to act rashly and do not like to judge something first without thinking about its legal basis and impact on social life. We must have a basis for judging something.' (Robi, interview, 31 August 2021)

Meanwhile, Siti placed greater emphasis on misleading fellow Muslims: 'the most crucial religious moderation at this time is suppressing the phenomenon of disbelief that is happening everywhere'. Furthermore, Hasanah explained:

'A person is said to be heretical if that person performs worship that is not recommended in Islam. Misleading fellow Muslims needs to be avoided because there are differences in worship that there is no prohibition to do so, and the act is still in line with the Qur'an.' (Hasanah, interview, 02 September 2021)

Hasanah also added, 'fellow Muslims and even non-Muslims, we need to help. We have to show that Islam also teaches fellow human beings to do good'.

The second point conveyed by the participants was a balanced understanding and experience. Hasanah said that 'we must think before doing and deciding something in all actions. It could be that what we have done can have a big

impact or harm'. At the same time, Robi explained the problem of self-introspection with the understanding that:

'As a Muslim, we should not be too confident in what we know. It would be better if we introspected ourselves first. Are we correct? Is our practice following the teachings brought by the Prophet? Are we correct according to the true teachings of Islam? This question must be answered first so that there is no term "follow-up" that can hinder the rights of others.' (Robi, interview, 31 August 2021)

The third point was about obligations and rights. Hasanah explained:

'We are not prohibited from doing good to Muslims and non-Muslims. We must do good and justice as long as they do not lead us to disobedience and do not destroy our faith.' (Hasanah, interview, 02 September 2021)

Meanwhile, Siti and Robi emphasised the issue of insulting other religions. Siti said, 'In religion, we must do good and not harm each other. Insulting other religions is dangerous because they will do the same to us'. Furthermore, Robi explained that:

'In the Qur'an, if we criticise other people's religion, it is as if we are cursing our religion. So it is permissible to treat non-Muslims fairly as long as they are not fighting our religion.' (Robi, interview, 31 August 2021)

The fourth point was tolerance. Robi explained, 'as discussed earlier, we have an obligation not to insult, vilify and revile what other people [non-Muslims] worship. The key point of religious moderation is tolerance'. Hasanah explained the importance of accepting the different views and thoughts in the community. She explained:

'We also do not know what other people are doing and what other people's intentions are. Not necessarily what looks different is contrary to what we believe to be true.' (Hasanah, interview, 02 September 2021)

The last point was equality towards fellow human beings. Hasanah stated that 'we must always do good and treat all humans fairly without discrimination'. Hasanah also continued her explanation related to equality using the term non-Muslim. She said, 'the term non-Muslim is much more polite and respectful. In my opinion, the term infidel is rude and leads to violent things'. Robi also explained briefly that 'we must respect and respect each other as human beings because we have the same dignity and worth'.

### Discussion

The main finding in this study was the way students read and interpreted the verses of the Qur'an. At least three methods were found: per word, per part and by whole verse. Judging from how the translation amendments were made by the three students (who were research participants) in different ways, the word-for-word interpretation process (by Robi) seemed more transparent and more accessible to follow than per part and whole verse (by Siti and Hasanah). The word-for-word interpretation process showed a

deep understanding of words, parts of verses and their relationships to form a comprehensive understanding. This word-for-word translation process can encourage students to borrow everyday words and be more meaningful, sound more comfortable and present a pleasant cognitive effect. Word-for-word reading and interpretation indicate that the student understands the studied verse and knows the context in which it is being discussed. As an indicator of understanding, students with a word-for-word reading process can interpret the verses of the Qur'an more broadly.

As the result of creating a theme during the analysis of the interview data presented in the results section, religious moderation has five principles. The first principle is to choose the middle way (*tawassuth*). This first principle emphasises the practice and understanding of religion that is not excessive so that it is not aggressive in preaching religious teachings, and it is not easy to disbelieve in fellow Muslims. The second principle is balance (*tawazun*). A Muslim must be balanced in the understanding and experience of religion. Self-introspection and thinking before taking action based on understanding can provide a foothold for a Muslim to distinguish between societal deviations and differences. This attitude is essential for the fulfilment of the rights of others.

The third principle is being straight and firm (*i'tidal*). Before a Muslim receives the right to be respected by others, a Muslim must respect others, especially those of a different religion. In this way, doing good to non-Muslims as long as they are not hostile to Islam, as explained in Qur'an 60:8, can realise social justice. The fourth principle is tolerance (*tasamuh*). This principle is manifested in the willingness of Muslims to accept diverse views and understandings, even though they differ in their opinions. Finally, the fifth principle is egalitarianism (*musawahi*). This principle emphasises that all human beings have the same value and dignity. Referring to non-Muslims as such rather than calling them infidels is included in this principle.

This second finding can explain the dimensions of religious moderation (accommodating local wisdom, anti-radicalism and tolerance), which can be used as variables to measure a person's level of religious moderation. Every Muslim should have a wise attitude in dealing with the significant differences that develop in society, especially differences in religion and belief, whose implementation is sometimes closely related to local culture and wisdom. Muslims should be accommodative of this as long as it does not conflict with the teachings of the Qur'an. In addition, every Muslim should also be able to express his or her religion in a balanced and fair manner so that the practice of religious radicalism does not become more widespread. More importantly, as discussed in this study, doing good and acting reasonably towards others as part of religious tolerance is the primary key to dealing with the reality of difference and pluralism.

With these findings, teaching students about the Qur'an and its interpretation needs to be carried out word for word so

that they have the right and general meaning construction. How to read and interpret word for word will provide a flexible and accommodating interpretation. An approach such as Robi's will provide students with experience in constructing the meaning of a verse. Students are accustomed to looking for the 'point' or the term 'sweet spot' (Rackley 2020), where they can construct the best meaning. This can be done by continuously increasing understanding of what is interpreted and constructed.

The explanation of word-for-word interpretation as the best teaching method does not mean that part-by-verse and whole-verse interpretation methods are not recommended in teaching students. This finding also provides a stage for learning about reading and interpreting the Qur'an. Reading and interpreting verses of the Qur'an in parts and as whole verses can also be a learning method for beginners. Considering the participant's religious education background, memorising verses and their translations such as the original text can be used for early and primary education students. Students who have not been able to do it can start by memorising per verse section, then study part by part for the next level. When students have reached the high school and college level, they need to be accustomed to learning word for word. College students are considered to have the ability to master a meaning in a particular context and change it in another context. Islamic religious education at the tertiary level should start implementing this method.

This research on the process of religious literacy provides clues on how traditional learning methods can still be applied but provides more opportunities for students to engage further with the Qur'an. Thus, this study can provide an overview of how the ethos of the religious literacy process is developed in students. The ethos of the religious literacy process that can be highlighted in this research is the approach used by students and the impact of the approach on the breadth and flexibility of interpretation. Thus, the ethos of the religious literacy process can help educators to identify how the Qur'an can be taught gradually and in stages.

Although this study has an essential contribution to providing implications for the conceptualisation of religious literacy and religious tolerance, it should be understood that there are several limitations to the findings of this study. Firstly, the present study recruited only three students, which does not lead to generalisable results. Secondly, the context of this research is also narrowed down only to terms of religious tolerance. Thus, generalisation claims cannot be made in this study. Our findings are also in line with what was conveyed by Polit and Beck (2010) that the main aim of this qualitative research is not to generalise but to provide a rich and contextual understanding of some aspects of the students' experience of reading the Qur'an. With these characteristics, these results may raise many questions for interested readers about the ethos of religious literacy and the activities of interpreting the Qur'an as a process of meaning construction. Given that the construction of meaning is also influenced by

many factors, such as a person's ability to read and the context under discussion, further research is needed to clarify religious literacy practices and processes used by students with different backgrounds.

## Conclusion

In this study, two things can be concluded. Firstly, by comparing the way the three students interpreted selected verses, it can be seen that students with a word-for-word translation process made more amendments. This process shows that these students can construct deeper, broader and more meaningful meanings that align with the current consumption that students need. This can be seen in translating the exact words as the original text. Meanwhile, translating by whole verse or part by part shows that they struggle to translate and interpret. They do not understand what is read and try hard to memorise it. Secondly, the student's way of constructing meaning is related to their perspective on the principle of religious moderation. The ability to translate word for word provides a broader perspective on diversity and the world. From three participants, there are three main dimensions of religious moderation, namely accommodating local wisdom, anti-radicalism and tolerance, which can then be used as one significant dimension, that is, national commitment. However, the construction of meaning in this study does not reveal the principle of deliberation as the sixth principle, as stated by Aziz et al. (2019).

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## Authors' contributions

Y.H. contributed to conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, writing of the original draft and supervision of the research. M.S. contributed to conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing the original draft and research validation. T.N.D. contributed to the formal analysis, investigation, validation, data curation and research resources. M.A.I. contributed to the formal analysis, investigation, validation, data curation and research resources. N.F. contributed to the investigation, validation and resources of the research. M.S. contributed to the investigation, data curation and research resources. N.M. contributed to the data curation and research resources. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the writing, review and editing.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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