

CONSTRUCTING NEW STAGES OF EDUCATION FOR MUSLIM CHILDREN: IMPACTS OF THE DISSEMINATION OF THE *IQRO'* METHOD TEXTBOOK ON ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

YUKI NAKATA



ABSTRACT: *The dissemination of the Iqro' method textbook through Qur'anic kindergartens and Qur'anic schools in Indonesia has encouraged the public's interest in reconsidering teaching methods and the skill of reading and reciting the Qur'an. Moreover, it has provided a chance to reconsider pre-school education for Muslims in Indonesia from the grass-roots level. In Malaysia, both the elementary schools under the Ministry of Education and private schools are also recommended to use Iqro' method. However, there are several private organizations in Malaysia that have attempted to maintain their originality by using alternatives to Iqro', such as Qira'ati and Al-Bargy from Indonesia, and by trying to develop original educational services. This paper tries to explore the dissemination of the Iqro' method textbook in which it has been revitalized and enriched educational services for Muslims in both Indonesia and Malaysia, by both the government sector and grass-roots efforts across the border.*

KEY WORDS: *the Iqro' method textbook, Qur'anic kindergartens and Qur'anic schools, and Muslims in both Indonesia and Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

As well as formal school education and literacy programs in one's mother tongue and national language, learning to read and recite (read aloud) the Qur'an is also considered part of a Muslim child's fundamental education. In Indonesia, Qur'anic learning was carried out by people in the community before the modern school system was introduced (Steenbrink, 1987).

Dr. Yuki Nakata is a Lecturer at the Faculty of Law TU (Toyo University), 5-28-20, Hakusan, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 112-8606, Japan. She has been conducting the research on Islamic education in Indonesia and Malaysia. For academic purposes, she can be reached at: yuki.nakata@tuba.ocn.ne.jp or nakatayuki9@gmail.com

A recent significant change in Qur'anic learning in Indonesia is the widespread access to methods for easy and rapid learning of reading and reciting the Qur'an. The most widely used textbook is the *Iqro'* method textbook, which is now familiar in the *pengajian Qur'an* (learning activities for reciting the Qur'an and the basics of Islam) for kindergarten and elementary school children. Moreover, the *Iqro'* method textbook was introduced to Muslims in Malaysia and other neighboring countries (LPPTKA & BKPRMI, 1996:21).

This development in the method of learning to recite the Qur'an is not simply a matter of educational methodology. In this paper, I examine how the dissemination of the *Iqro'* method textbook has played an important role in improving and revitalizing education for Muslims in both Indonesia and Malaysia. I intend to interpret this theme from a non-Muslim point of view.

The Islamic revival or Islamization in Indonesia has been a major topic of academic research. Various studies about *madrrasah* (Islamic schools) and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) in Indonesia have been conducted (Dhofier, 1985; Steenbrink, 1987; and Rahardjo ed., 1988). However, the more recent *pengajian Al-Qur'an* have been paid little attention.

Most of the *pengajian Al-Qur'an* have been set up at each community's mosque, mostly without joining the formal school system. Muslim children come to the mosque every evening after learning at general pre-schools and elementary schools that have adopted the national curriculum. Although a non-formal school, the activities of *pengajian Al-Qur'an* have an important role in fostering Muslim children. *Iqro'* method textbooks have been disseminated through the establishment of Qur'anic schools in mosques for kindergarten and elementary school children by people in the community as replacements for the traditional-style *pengajian Al-Qur'an*.

In conducting this study in Indonesia, I mainly collected data from both the government and private organizations and interviewed several organizations who managed kindergartens and used the *Iqro'* method textbook or alternatives to the *Iqro'* method textbook. I collected data mainly in Yogyakarta and other cities in Indonesia for four months; and spent a further three months in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In Malaysia, I interviewed several key persons at the Ministry of Education, Islamic organizations, kindergartens and the publishing companies that publish the textbooks for rapid learning in reading and reciting the Qur'an.¹

WHAT IS THE *IQRO'* BOOK?

The *Iqro'* method textbook is one of the most popular textbooks for easy practice in reading and reciting the Qur'an, not only in Indonesia but also in other Southeast Asian

¹I am grateful to have received an API Fellowships in 2005-2006, which enabled me to do this research and provided kind support during my research in Indonesia and Malaysia. I would like to express my gratitude to all the people who generously provided me with various information concerning the recent condition of Qur'anic learning and pre-school education in Indonesia and Malaysia. This article is my working paper of API Fellowships (the work of the 2005/2006 API Fellow the Nippon Foundation, pp.206-211). The views of the author do not reflect those of the API Fellowships Program, The Nippon Foundation and the LIPI, or any institutions involved in the program.

countries. A local religious teacher of *pengajian Al-Qur'an* in Kotagede, Yogyakarta in Central Java invented the *Iqro'* method textbook around the end of the 1980s and founded Qur'anic kindergartens and Qur'anic schools for pre-school and elementary school children.

Traditionally, the first step in learning how to recite the Qur'an is to learn the names of the Arabic letters and the vowel marks. The second step is to learn how to pronounce the Arabic letters. After that, the learners can practice the methods of pronunciation and the recitation of Arabic phrases where the words already contain the vowel marks and also recite the Qur'an with the teacher. One of the peculiarities of Arabic letters is that the form of each letter changes depending on its position in the word. The Arabic language system is quite complicated for children and they need a few years to master reading and recitation of the Qur'an fluently.

However, the *Iqro'* method textbook makes drastic changes to this way of learning. The textbook starts with the pronunciation of Arabic letters and simple words that already contain the vowel marks so that learners can easily learn the recitation of the phrases of the Qur'an. The tools in this textbook enable children to learn how to read and recite the Qur'an more easily than they could with previous methods, such as the *Bagdadiyah* method. Many children who were around five years old took only about six months to master reading the Qur'an by using the *Iqro'* textbook. The dissemination of the *Iqro'* method textbook has promoted peoples' interests and needs in learning to read and recite the Qur'an.

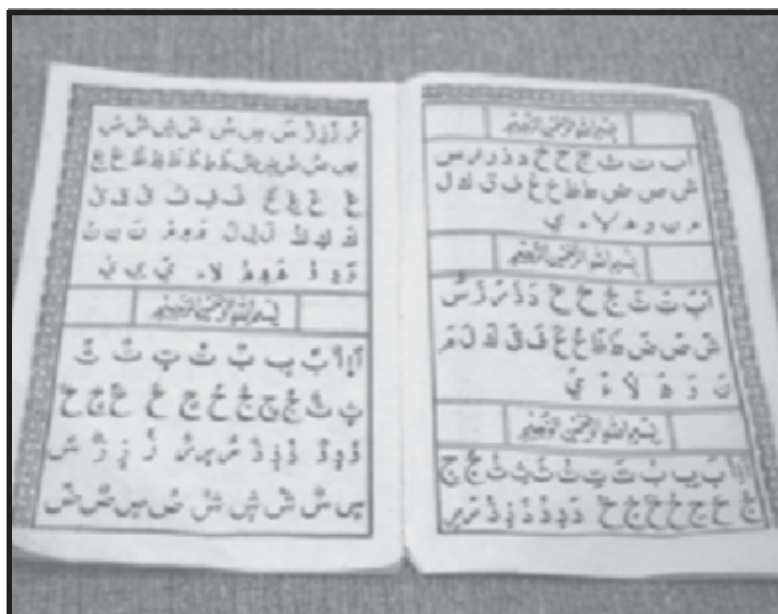


Figure 1:

Textbook for the traditional method of learning to read and recite the Qur'an. This is usually called the *Bagdadiyah* Method (*Metode Bagdadiyah*) in Indonesia or *Kaedah Muqaddam* in Malaysia.

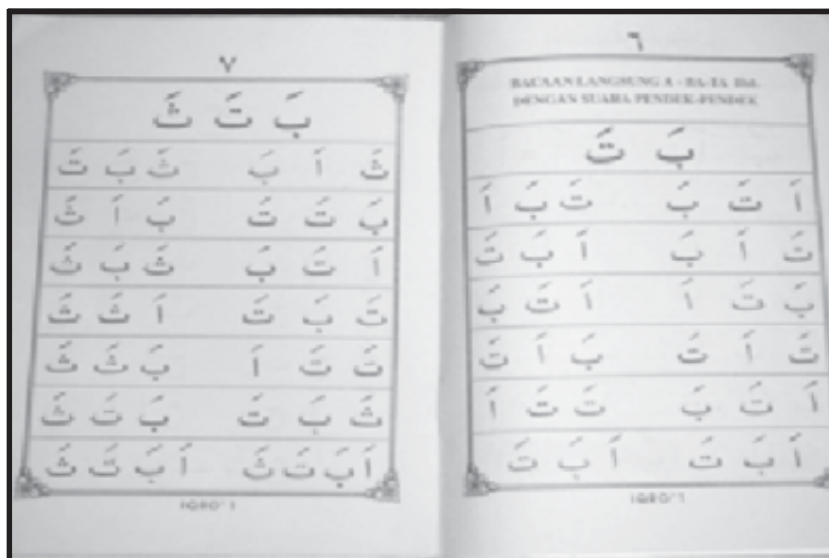


Figure 2:
One of the pages of the first book of the *Iqro'* method textbook series.

IMPACTS OF THE *Iqro'* METHOD BOOK ON EDUCATION IN INDONESIA

Flourishing development of various alternative methods to the *Iqro'* method textbook Muslim students and intellectuals were key players in the dissemination of the *Iqro'* method textbook to almost all parts of Indonesia through non-formal Qur'anic kindergartens and Qur'anic schools, known as TKA/TPA (*Taman Kanak-kanak Al-Qur'an/Taman Pendidikan Al-Qur'an*).

Around the beginning of the 1990s, concerned about political conditions, the Soeharto regime shifted its stance to become tolerant of the social activities of Muslim intellectuals (Hefner, 1997 and 2002). Therefore, the dissemination of the *Iqro'* method textbook and the spread non-formal Qur'anic kindergartens and schools was smoothly supported by government personnel.

After the *Iqro'* method textbook was disseminated through the non-formal Qur'anic schools during the 1990s, many Muslims in Indonesia had the opportunity to consider more effective ways of learning to read and recite Qur'an. *Iqro'* method textbooks are sold at bookstores and daily bazaars or markets, so it is easy for Qur'anic teachers to obtain the textbook and analyze both the advantages and disadvantages of the *Iqro'* method. This textbook has been always open to anyone to use and criticize and some teachers invented other textbooks according to their own perspectives and viewpoints on the practice of Qur'an recitation.

Even before the *Iqro'* method, several methods existed. The *Qira'ati* method textbook, organized by *guru ngaji* (Qur'anic teachers) in Semarang, Central Java during

the 1960s was invented before the *Iqro'* proliferation.² The *Qira'ati* method textbook was one of the references for inventing the *Iqro'* method. The inventors of both the *Iqro'* method textbook and the *Qira'ati* method textbook operate their own businesses and the *Qira'ati* method was introduced to the local religious teacher in Kotagede, Yogyakarta through their business relationship, who afterward became the inventor of the *Iqro'* method textbook (Budiyanto, 1999:44).³

The *Qira'ati* method inspired the teacher to invent a more effective method for children's learning. The *Iqro'* method textbook was introduced to the public through the broad Muslim university students' networks that extend throughout Indonesia, because the inventor of the *Iqro'* method was involved in Qur'anic education in Yogyakarta communities in cooperation with university students. Most of the students were active in student organizations at their campuses in Yogyakarta.

At first, the *Iqro'* book began to be used mainly at non-formal kindergarten and elementary schools (TKA/TPA) that had been set up at mosques and other prayer places by university student promoters. On the other hand, the *Qira'ati* method and other methods chose not only the mosque but also private kindergartens in which to promote the use of their own textbooks through their family and specific organization networks. Recently, several textbooks for methods of learning to recite the Qur'an that are made in Indonesia have been used in Malaysia, Singapore and other countries.

GROWING COMPETITION AMONG ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

Why did the inventors of alternative textbooks to the *Iqro'* method textbook choose pre-schools to promote their textbooks? This issue is related to the situation of the pre-school education in Indonesia. Around 98% of kindergartens in Indonesia are private schools, and the attendance rate in 2003 was less than 20% (Hattori, 2006:185). Along with the expansion of the middle class Muslim population, the numbers of expensive, formal pre-schools managed by Islamic foundations have been increasing since the mid-1990s and are expected to provide better quality education to Muslim children.

Even though they are non-formal schools, the Qur'anic kindergartens (TKA/TPA) using the *Iqro'* method at community mosques also have an important role in providing pre-school education for children from various social classes.⁴ Both urban and rural community members have had a chance to reconsider their own pre-school education through the education at the Qur'anic kindergartens and Qur'anic schools. Some of people who used to be teachers at the Qur'anic kindergartens and Qur'anic schools began to look for better quality, formal pre-school education for Muslim children, as well as alternative methods to the *Iqro'* method.⁵

²Interview with Mr. Bunyamin, son of the inventor of the *Qira'ati* method, Mr. Dahran Salim, in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, on 12 September 2005.

³Interview with also Mr. Budiyanto in Kotagede, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on 18 August 2005.

⁴The total number of Qur'anic kindergartens and Qur'anic schools registered with BKPRMI (*Badan Komunikasi Pemuda Remaja Masjid Indonesia*) in 2000 were 56 and 156, respectively.

⁵According to interviews with the school teachers of several kindergartens at Bandung in West Java and at Yogyakarta in Central Java from August to December 2005.

Inventors of alternatives to the *Iqro'* method had an opportunity to meet these demands. Some of them began to run their own formal kindergartens and use their own original methods and textbooks for practicing to read and recite the Qur'an as one of the teaching materials.

As well as producing textbooks and other educational materials, Muslims in Indonesia have competitively explored better education for their children in various aspects. Some kindergartens, like the kindergarten at the *Istiqlal* (Independence) mosque organization in Jakarta, have tried using puzzles and toys concerning basic knowledge of Islam and Arabic characters in order to teach three- to five-years-old children more effectively in their daily schooling. They adopted the teaching model of the Creative Pre-school in Tallahassee, Florida, USA (United States of America) as the reference for developing their educational model.⁶

One Japanese educational model is also popular among Muslims who have engaged in education in kindergartens and elementary schools. The model is the story of *Totto-chan* by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi. *Totto-chan: A Little Girl at the Window* (in Indonesian, *Totto-chan: Si Gadis Kecil di Tepi Jendela*) introduces *Tomoe-gakuen*, a private kindergarten and elementary school in Tokyo that was closed because of the air raid on Tokyo in 1945. This non-fiction story tells about *Totto-chan* (Tetsuko Kuroyanagi)'s experiences at *Tomoe-gakuen* through the eyes of *Totto-chan* and explains how Mr. Kobayashi, the principal, was always creative in having the children enjoy their school life. The story provided a chance for the Japanese to reconsider their education system in the 1980s. The book was translated into various languages and the Indonesian version was published in 1985.

In Indonesia, university students who were engaged in educational activities at mosques and prayer places had a chance to read this book. They were impressed by the story, especially Mr. Kobayashi's flexible and greathearted attitude to the children's needs and feelings, and his creativity in daily education. Several principals of pre-schools whom I met in Yogyakarta tried to adopt Mr. Kobayashi's ideas, such as making a used train car into a class room (Kuroyanagi, 1984:41-43), and inviting farmers to tell the children how to grow rice (Kuroyanagi, 1984:202-206). They are now aiming at developing their own schools as Muslim adaptations of the *Tomoe-gakuen* model described in *Totto-chan*.

From the above conditions, I can consider that the dissemination of the *Iqro'* method textbook in Indonesia has had an important role in encouraging the development of alternative methods for the rapid learning of Qur'an recitation. Besides this, the textbook's dissemination has induced a competitive atmosphere among people who are engaged in education to discuss and explore more actively how to provide better education for Muslim children in the present society.

⁶Interview with the principal of the kindergarten in the *Istiqlal* mosque (Ms. Nibras), who attended the teacher training program of the Creative Pre-School in Florida, USA, on 13 October 2005.

EVOLUTION OF THE *Iqro'* METHOD TEXTBOOK MOVEMENT IN MALAYSIA

The dissemination of the *Iqro'* method textbook in Indonesia has affected Muslims in Malaysia through government-to-government communication. In Indonesia, the government considers the *Iqro'* method textbook as the most recommended method for learning to read and recite the Qur'an; however, whether the schools use it or not depends on the principal's opinion, in both government and private schools. The Malaysian case is different because of the national system there.

Generally in Malaysia, religious affairs – including religious education – are dependant on each state's religious laws. However, recently the federal government is also attempting to control and reinforce Islamic education through the national schools (Hasim, 2004:226). The government has used the *Iqro'* method textbook at national elementary schools (*Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan*) since 1994.⁷ Moreover, since 2005 the government began the J-QAF program, which provides special Islamic education including the teaching of *Jawi* (writing the Malay language using Arabic letters with five additional letters to allow for Malay phonemes, the Qur'an (reading and recitation of the Qur'an), the Arabic language and basic Islamic rules and morals, the purpose of which is to reinforce Islamic education through the national schools (Hasim, 2004:130).

Especially after 9th November 2001 event, the government of Malaysia has reinforced its control of Islam in the country, which has affected the educational scene. For these conditions, the government uses the *Iqro'* method textbook as a tool to reinforce the practice of reciting the Qur'an. Since the J-QAF program began, the government has introduced the *Iqro'* method textbook as the free, standard text to be used by all first grade students at national elementary schools.⁸

As in government schools, private schools also are encouraged to adopt the national curriculum. Even though the Malaysian government exercises stronger control over private schools than in Indonesia, the schools still have chance to freely choose their methods and textbooks for practicing to read and recite the Qur'an. As well as the *Iqro'* method textbooks, other methods have also been introduced to Muslims in Malaysia.

A notable point is that the most of the popular methods of rapid learning in reading and reciting the Qur'an in Malaysia were invented by Indonesian Qur'anic teachers. For instance, the *Qira'ati* method from Semarang, Central Java, was introduced in 1989 by an Indonesian who had finished study in the Middle East in 1988 and moved to Malaysia.⁹ He introduced the *Qira'ati* method textbook to the schools of one of the Islamic organizations, ABIM (*Angkatan Belia*

⁷In Malaysia, there have been discussions about the lack of effective teaching methods for Qur'an recitation (Hasim, 2004:195).

⁸Interview with Mr. Muhammad Haji Syafie at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on February 2006.

⁹Interview with Mr. Muhammad Masruh Ahmad at Kajang, Selangor Darul Ehsan in Malaysia, on 16 February 2006.

Islam Malaysia or Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia). Since then, the ABIM kindergarten and elementary schools have adapted the *Qira'ati* method textbook for practicing the recitation of the Qur'an. Recently, the ABIM schools began to use an alternative method, which was also invented by an Indonesian Muslim in Bukit Tinggi, West Sumatera of Indonesia.¹⁰

Another famous method from Indonesia is the *Al-Barqy* method; the Al-Ameen Publishing Company has been printing a Malaysian version since 2002. The company had a relationship with the inventor of the *Al-Barqy* method, Mr. Muhadjir Surthon in Surabaya, East Java of Indonesia. The director of Al-Ameen came across the method when he looked for some alternatives to *Iqro'*.¹¹ The textbooks are used at elementary schools under the Al-Ameen group and several private kindergartens. Recently, the company has developed original textbooks of easy and rapid learning of Malay, English and Arabic. These textbooks also successfully sold same as the *Al-Barqy* method textbook and distributed to private schools, including schools for non-Muslims.

This encounter with the *Al-Barqy* method textbook in Indonesia gave the Al-Ameen Publishing Company the opportunity to use and sell this textbook in Malaysia, and moreover encouraged the company to develop textbooks for learning other languages and broadened their share of educational services.¹²

Both the Malaysian *Iqro'* method books and other textbooks for learning Qur'an recitation that are originally from Indonesia are published in Malaysia with a different design from that in Indonesia. They are modified to fit the Malaysian style by, for example, using *Jawi* instead of using the *Latin* alphabet, following the general practice in Islamic studies in Malaysia. Even though the books have a different design from those in Indonesia, the right to publish them in Malaysia is based on a contractual relationship between the publisher and the Indonesian inventors of the textbooks. The Malaysian publishers pay royalties from the sales of the textbooks to the Indonesian organizations and foundations who invented the original method textbook.¹³

If there is no agreement with the Indonesian side, Malaysian organizations or publishing companies have no official right to publish and sell the textbooks in Malaysia. These business relationships maintain an equal partnership between the Indonesians and Malaysians involved.

There have been problems concerning labor relations between today's Indonesia and Malaysia; however, as is the case in the method textbooks for reading and reciting

¹⁰Interview with Mr. Zainal Abidin B. Abd. Latiff at Seremban, Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia, on 11 January 2006.

¹¹Since the 1990s, the Al-Ameen Publishing Company has created cross-national Muslim networks in Southeast Asia and every *Aidul Adha/Idul Adha* (Islamic Festival of Sacrifice) has conducted charity activities for Muslims in Cambodia. Interview with Mr. Che Mazlan Saad, the Director of Al-Ameen Service Holdings Sdn. Bhd. in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 11 February 2006.

¹²Various teacher training courses using original textbooks from Al-Ameen are held there every year. Interview with Mr. Che Mazlan Saad, the Director of Al-Ameen Service Holdings Sdn. Bhd. in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 11 February 2006.

¹³Interview with Ms. Erweesbee Maimanati, the daughter of Mr. Asad Humam, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on 15 November 2005. Interview also with the inventor of the *Al-Barqy* method textbook, Mr. Muhadjir Surthon, in Surabaya, East Java of Indonesia, on 9 March 2006.

the Qur'an, there are also equal relations between the two countries. In other words, Indonesian methods of reading and reciting the Qur'an have recently had a significant role in improving Islamic education in both the government and private sectors in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

The dissemination of the *Iqro'* method textbook through Qur'anic kindergartens and Qur'anic schools in Indonesia has encouraged the public's interest in reconsidering teaching methods and the skill of reading and reciting the Qur'an. Moreover, it has provided a chance to reconsider pre-school education for Muslims in Indonesia from the grass-roots level. Actually, the government's intentions to follow the global trend of promoting pre-school education must also have greatly affected the recent development of private kindergartens for Muslim children in Indonesia. However, the spread of access to non-formal Qur'anic kindergartens that use the *Iqro'* method textbook has also played an important role in promoting the grass-roots need for better quality pre-school education.

The process was not closed but opened to various perspectives to improve educational services for Muslims. Besides this, it promoted the building of educational business partnerships beyond the border. In Malaysia, both the elementary schools under the Ministry of Education and private schools are also recommended to use *Iqro'*. However, there are several private organizations that have attempted to maintain their originality by using alternatives to *Iqro'*, such as *Qira'ati* and *Al-Barqy* from Indonesia, and by trying to develop original educational services.

Throughout my research project, it could be seen that the dissemination of the *Iqro'* method textbook has revitalized and enriched educational services for Muslims in both Indonesia and Malaysia, by both the government sector and grass-roots efforts across the border.

REFERENCES

- Budiyanto. (1999). "K.H. As'ad Humam, Tokoh Pebaharu Sistem Pengajaran Baca Tulis Al-Qur'an di Indonesia: Riwayat Hidup, Ide-ide dan Perjuangannya". *Laporan Hasil Penelitian Individual, Tidak Diterbitkan*. Yogyakarta: Fakultas Tarbiyah IAIN Sunan Kalijaga.
- Departmen Pendidikan Nasional. (2001). *Pedoman Penyelenggaraan TK Alternatif: Model TK Al-Qur'an*. Jakarta: Depdiknas RI.
- Dhoffer, Zamakhsyari. (1985). *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi tentang Pandangan Hidup Kyai di Jawa*. Translation. Jakarta: LP3ES.
- Hasbullah, Mueflich. (2000). "Cultural Presentation of the Muslim Middle Class in Contemporary Indonesia" in *Studia Islamica*, 7(2), pp.1-58.
- Hasim, Rosnani. (2004). *Educational Dualism in Malaysia: Implications for Theory and Practice*. Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, Second Edition.

YUKI NAKATA,
Constructing New Stages of Education for Muslim Children

- Hattori, Mina. (2006). "Indonesia: Doutokuteki kachi to chisikisyutoku no chouwa wo mezasite" in Mitsuhiro Ikeda & Chiaki Yamada [eds]. *Azia no syugakuzen kyouiku*. Tokyo: n.p.
- Hefner, Robert W. (1997). "Islamization and Democratization in Indonesia" in Robert W. Hefner & Patricia Harvatic [eds]. *Islam in an Era of Nation-State*. Honolulu, USA: University of Hawaii Press, pp.75-127.
- Hefner, Robert W. (2002). *Civil Islam*. Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press.
- Interview with Mr. Budiyanto in Kotagede, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on 18 August 2005.
- Interview with Mr. Bunyamin, son of the inventor of the *Qira'ati* method, Mr. Dahran Salim, in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, on 12 September 2005.
- Interview with Mr. Che Mazlan Saad, the Director of Al-Ameen Service Holdings Sdn. Bhd. in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 11 February 2006.
- Interview with Mr. Muhammad Haji Syafie at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on February 2006.
- Interview with Mr. Muhammad Masruh Ahmad at Kajang, Selangor Darul Ehsan in Malaysia, on 16 February 2006.
- Interview with Mr. Zainal Abidin B. Abd. Latiff at Seremban, Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia, on 11 January 2006.
- Interview with Ms. Erweesbee Maimanati, the daughter of Mr. Asad Humam, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on 15 November 2005.
- Interview with the inventor of the *Al-Barqy* method textbook, Mr. Muhadjir Surthon, in Surabaya, East Java in Indonesia, on 9 March 2006.
- Interview with the principal of the kindergarten in the *Istiqlal* mosque (Ms.Nibras) in Jakarta, Indonesia, who attended the teacher training program of the Creative Pre-school in Florida, USA, on 13 October 2005.
- Interviews with the school teachers of several kindergartens in Bandung in West Java and Yogyakarta in Central Java, Indonesia, from August to December 2005.
- Kuroyanagi, Tetsuko. (1984). *Madogiwa no Totto-chan*. Tokyo: Koudansya Bunko.
- LPPTKA & BKPRMI. (1996). *Sekilas Catatan Perjalanan LPPTKA*. Jakarta: LPPTKA [Lembaga Pendidikan dan Pengajaran Taman Kanak-kanak Al-Qur'an] dan BKPRMI [Badan Komunikasi Pemuda Remaja Masjid Indonesia].
- Rahardjo, Dawam ed. (1988). *Pesantren dan Perubahan Sosial*. Jakarta: LP2M.
- Steenbrink, Karel A. (1987). *Pesantren, Madrasah dan Sekolah*. Translation. Jakarta: LP3ES.