

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

An Emerging Framework: Literacy Training Module for Social Navigation of Refugees

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ABSTRACT – Rohingya refugees are a group of people who does not only have well-founded fear that they cannot return home, but are afraid of challenges awaiting them in the host country. Due to their traumatic past experiences, the Rohingya refugees rely much on their own community specifically the community leaders for assistance. However, the lack of community leaders as well as deficient hierarchical engagement with the leaders have created more difficulties for the refugees to seek for help. Social navigation for survival becomes an issue not only because they have language barriers but also internal conflicts on the imagined terrains (the hopes) and the unexpected circumstances (the difficulties) they encounter in the host country. This study aims to develop a literacy training module for Rohingya youth refugees to become social navigators. These refugees are expected to provide horizontal (peer-like) engagement to their community. To meet the aim of the study, 15 Rohingya youth refugees were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments were used: guided questionnaires, interviews and baseline tests. The themes from the data suggest that despite the challenges in language, the participants exhibited strong sense of brotherhood with other fellow refugees. Religion has developed a powerful bond that ignites their willingness to extend assistance to their community. However, the participants unfolded their uncertainties on the ways and resources available, to be of help. It is also apparent that, a conceptual framework suitable for this literacy training module for social navigation emerged from the overall data. The framework will serve as a guide to develop a Literacy Module to groom social navigators to help their people, the Rohingya refugees.

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INTRODUCTION

War or state of unrest has become the impetus for the influx of refugees and asylum-seekers all over the world. Being involved in a war or threatened by violence has caused people to flee their own countries to find a safer place – a place where they are free to practise their religion as well as to earn a living. However, it seems that both freedom and safety have a price. Being in a foreign land makes one a minority and thus, getting together with own countrymates to build a community in a faraway land is a step to boost a sense of belonging and enliven the spirit of one's own country. This paper highlights the effort made by a group of Rohingya youth refugees in moving their own community to a country that is not one's own.

In many parts of the world, there is an ever-increasing number of people who are forced to flee their countries due to generalised situations of violence which threaten their freedom and safety. Malaysia too has received a growing number of refugees, which are now flooding its different states all over the country. According to UNHCR (2019), as of end May 2019, there are 173, 730 registered refugees and asylum-seekers who are registered with UNHCR in Malaysia. Some 150,430 were reported to have originated from Myanmar - of which 93,190 are Rohingyas, and other ethnicities such as Chins, Myanmar Muslims, Rakhines and Arakanese. Refugees also arrived from other countries of persecution and conflict like Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Palestine (UNHCR, 2019). From the highlighted statistics, it could be seen that the Rohingyas form a reasonably big group of refugees in Malaysia, with 68% of them are men, while 32% are women (UNHCR, 2019).

Because of their distressing preceding experiences, the Rohingya refugees depend greatly on their own community specifically the community leaders for assistance. Then again, the lack of community leaders and hierarchical engagement the refugees practised have caused them more difficulties to search for assistance. The community leaders more often than not, are characterised as having a greater status in the aspects of education, social skills or financial capacity within their community. Additionally, social navigation for survival becomes an issue not only because they have language barriers but also internal conflicts between their hopes and the realities in the host country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, refugees have limited access to education, particularly language and literacy, or other forms of social support as mentioned by Martone et al. (2014); Refugee Council of Australia (2011); van Waas (2010); Windle and Miller (2012). This exclusion has a great impact on the refugees who can barely return home, and thus must face the challenges that await them in the host country.

In the case of Malaysia as the host country for Rohingya refugees, language and literacy problems that the refugees encounter, are mainly because of the dissimilar alphabetical language system they use as compared to the ones used in Malaysia. In Malaysia, both the national language and the second language (Malay and English languages) are Roman alphabetical languages. Contrariwise, the Rohingyas use a language of non-roman alphabetical background (written mother-tongue language without roman alphabets). This difference has caused the learning of both Malay and English languages a little hard. The focus on language and literacy due to low or zero-literacy in the host country's first and second languages poses a distinctive hurdle to gain access to other parts of the life and survival in the host country i.e. Malaysia.

Another challenge for educators when it comes to teaching first or second language is in terms of the different levels of students in a class. In a past Malaysian study, it was found that due to the unique composition of students, in terms of age, learning abilities and knowledge, it was difficult to apply the conventional teaching approach in a language class (Sankaran et al., 2019). Rather, the students were found to be more responsive to peer-learning approach where they engaged in group activities and active interaction with peers. Thus, this approach can be adopted for programmes aiming to improve the students' literacy.

The dire need to rectify the problem of illiteracy is how this issue will severely impact the refugees' opportunities to employment and resettlement (Datta, 2015). Normally, resettlement programmes require the person to be literate but many of Rohingya refugees are illiterate (Datta, 2015). In another Malaysian based research, with regards to education for Rohingya refugees, Letchamanan (2013) argues on the importance of education and more importantly in providing their children with quality education that can prepare them to be independent and "uplift them from poverty" (p. 9). She also emphasised that the Rohingya children should be taught based on an appropriate curriculum that fits their need rather than adopting the host country's curriculum.

Worldwide, only 50% of refugee children attended primary school and 22% attended secondary school (UNHRC, 2017). In Malaysia, only about 39% of Rohingya children received education in 120 informal education centres all over Malaysia (UNHRC, 2017). It was also reported by Letchamanan (2013) that most teachers at several informal education centres she visited were refugees themselves. Whilst these teachers received teacher training from UNHRC, they still need other training including psycho-social counselling as they too had undergone challenges as refugees.

Despite the lack of available education support system for them and their teachers, some Rohingya children show innate interest in knowledge seeking and helping others. Several documented cases revealed the motivation to progress of children and youngsters in Rohingya communities, which include a young Rohingya refugee who is dedicated to help his community (Farzana et al., 2020), and a young female who strive to get education at an informal school despite being much older than her peers (UNHRC, 2017). Whilst lacking in terms of formal education, these children and youths are "media-literate" and have been acknowledged in other study as playing a key role in "educating their communities including the older generations" (Nisa, 2019, p. 96). From these cases, it seems that some of these children and youngsters hope to further develop themselves and at the same time are motivated to help others in their community but lack the resources and support to do so. Hence, this paper seeks to answer these research questions:

- a. What are the Rohingya youth refugees' views about their roles in helping their community?
- b. What are the outcomes of the need analysis study on the development of a suitable refugee training module for helping their community?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

For this study, 15 Rohingya youth participants from Selangor were recruited through snowballing technique (Table 1). They have resided in Malaysia for a minimum of three years and have secured some form of employment. Their age range is between 17-25 years old. Most of them do menial jobs which include kitchen helpers, grass cutters and store helpers. As the nature of the jobs requires communication in the host country's (Malaysia) language, all of them can speak in Malay to a certain extent. Being employed, the participants do not depend on other fellow refugees to survive as they themselves are independent to a certain extent. Being independent gives them the opportunities to further equip themselves with other relevant skills to ensure their survival in the host country.

Table 1. Demographic details of participants.

No. of Participant	Age	Job	Language Literacy
1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10		Grass cutters	
2, 5, 11, 12	17-25	Kitchen helpers	Rohingya Malay
13, 14, 15		Store helpers	

Data Collection

Instruments

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments. Literacy baseline tests, interview protocol and guided questionnaire were employed to collect the data.

Procedures

The data collection procedure started with a baseline literacy test whereby the participants were given a list of items to be answered in 3 sections (A, B & C). Part A consists of Listening and Speaking components whereby participants were required to listen to simple questions in English and respond if they understood the questions. In Part B, the participants were required to identify the same and different shapes to gauge their ability to recognise roman alphabets and numbers. Part C consists of Writing section in which the questions were read by the researchers and the participants were required to write their responses if they understood the questions and able to write their names and home addresses. This test was to gauge the participants' current language literacy ability.

Following this, a guided questionnaire was administered and the participants were assisted by the researcher while they were reading the questions and writing their answers in the questionnaires. Then, the participants were divided into groups of 3-4 for focus group interviews. Each research team member was assigned to conduct a focus group interview. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio recorded and conducted in Malay language. No translators were needed for the interviews as the participants could speak in Malay. The interview sessions which lasted between 15 to 20 minutes each, have helped to further probe and gain in-depth data from the participants.

Data Analysis

The baseline test was analysed by looking at the 'can do' abilities of the participants. This includes the participants' abilities to write their names and home addresses. Their ability to read was also exhibited through the can do abilities which were scored according to the correct answers provided. In other words, the baseline test was analysed using frequency counts of the can do abilities.

Thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to analyse the guided open-ended questionnaires and the interview transcripts (non-verbatim) from the focus group interviews. The transcripts which initially were in Malay have been translated to English for data interpretation and publication purposes. Data gathered from this study using the baseline test, guided open-ended questionnaire and interview protocols act as the means to gauge the participants' level of functional literacy skills and abilities.

FINDINGS

Out of the 15 participants, 10 of them obtained an overall score of 15/50 marks, another 2 participants scored 20/50 and the remaining 3 obtained 22/50 marks. These findings clearly showed their low level of English Language literacy. The themes gathered from the guided-questionnaire and the focus group interviews were found to be related to the participants' language abilities, interests in language learning and influence of religion. Specifically, the themes are 'Zero English Language Proficiency', 'Different Alphabetical System', 'Interest in Learning English', and 'Religion – being Muslims' as further elaborated in the following sections.

Zero English Language Proficiency

One of the main sections in the need analysis document examined the participants' English language literacy abilities. The participants were required to rate their writing, speaking and reading abilities in English. Most of them rated themselves as 'poor' to 'none at all' for the three language skills assessed. This signifies that the participants, who are Rohingya youths, consider themselves to be almost illiterate in the English language.

Based on these findings, focus-group interviews were conducted with the aim to understand the situation better. When probed, the participants highlighted that they could not read, understand words spoken or written in English as they had little or no exposure to English at all when they were back in their home country. Majority of them had only primary school education. Their schooling years were interrupted due to the war and they had to flee their country. As mentioned by Participant 5, "*I went to school but for a very short while, there was war and we had to leave.*"

While some had only primary school education, a few had no exposure to any form of formal education at all. They only knew how to speak their mother tongue, which is the Rohingya language, but could not read or write. Poverty was cited as the reason why they did not attend school. This was mentioned by a participant when asked about the level of education he possessed. Participant 3 revealed that he did not get to attend school at all due to the economic situation of his family back in his country because "*We had no money, so I did not go to school. I only can speak Rohingya language, but I cannot read or write.*"

Without basic formal education or even with little primary education, this makes it challenging for the participants to comprehend the language(s) used in the host country, Malaysia. This does not only pose challenges in communication but also resulted in difficulties in seeking proper employment.

Failure to gain decent employment is not helping their effort to elevate their economic status and their attempt to assist other fellow refugees. Additionally, with zero English language proficiency, it becomes even more difficult for these

Rohingya youth refugees to apply for resettlement in other countries especially English-speaking countries. As a result, they are stuck at where they first started in the host country, they could not provide proper assistance to other fellow refugees and the cycle of poverty might continue.

Different Alphabetical System

From the needs analysis, findings show that even those who attended school for a while before they fled their country could not read or write in English despite being able to pick up some basic words. When probed during the focus group interview, one of the reasons cited for their inability to read or write, or even successfully attempt to learn in English was due to the different alphabetical system used in the host country compared to the ones the Rohingya youth refugees were exposed to in their own country. In their home country Myanmar, the system used is the Burmese alphabet with unique Burmese writing system. It is very different from the system used for English which is the Latin or Roman alphabet writing system. This very stark difference makes it challenging for the participants to learn reading or writing in English. They found it difficult as they could not understand the letters, as mentioned by Participant 7, *“It is difficult, I can’t understand the letter, difficult to read or write.”*

It is clear that for them, to learn English, requires a lot of efforts. Not only that the language is alien to them, the alphabet writing system is equally foreign to the participants. Hence, they need to be given relevant input if they were to master English.

Interest in Learning English

Despite the language barrier, differences in the alphabetical systems, issues of poverty and other challenges faced by the participants in the host country, the participants reiterated that learning English was paramount for them particularly for employment and resettlement purposes. As mentioned by Participant 8 during the focus group interview, *“I want to learn English so that I can understand what people say, I can respond to them, I can read road signs and most importantly, I can get better jobs.”*

They believe that by being proficient in English, their lives would be a bit easier as they could communicate with those from the host country better. Participant 6 highlighted: *“When we know English, we can communicate better, and life would be much easier.”*

Apart from that, the participants believe that with better language proficiency especially in English, better employment opportunities would be ensured. Getting better jobs would then guarantee that their livelihood will improve. Proficiency in both Malay and English also would enable the participants to assist their fellow refugees better. These were mentioned by Participant 1 who quipped that *“I think if I know English, not only can I get good jobs, I can also help my people. We belong together, same race, same religion and we are poor. Helping them is important.”*

The participants believe they would gain in understanding and will be able to use English, hence, they were very much interested to learn English. As highlighted above, obtaining better employment and assisting fellow refugees were cited as the plus points gained from learning English.

Religion – being Muslims

All the participants were born Muslims, and Islam is the religion they were exposed to. It is observed that the refugees are practising Muslims even in their host country, Malaysia. They observe their religious obligations seriously. They perform their prayers, fast during Ramadhan and read the Quran. Closeness to their religion has helped them develop patience during trying times. As mentioned by Participant 1, *“My religion helps me develop patience when I face problems.”*

The participants also feel that religion is important as it helps as daily guidance. This was mentioned by Participant 2 who quipped, *“My religion guides me, every day I try to read the Quran and I refer to Allah.”*

The participants value religion greatly. To them, religion is important, and it is obvious that religion holds the participants together during trying times at many levels. Religion becomes their source of guidance.

As they embrace the same religion, they also developed a strong kinship with one another. They possess the inner strength and bond as well as have the intention to help other fellow refugees. It is this kinship that becomes the reason for wanting to help other fellow refugees, as stated by Participant 8, *“We are Muslims and I want to help other refugees as they are Muslims too, life is difficult for them.”*

The Rohingya youth refugee participants in this study highlighted many challenges that they face in their host country, Malaysia. One that stands obvious is language proficiency or the lack of it. Despite their tenacity to improve their livelihood, their lack of language proficiency stands a barrier. It limits communication and in turn, decreases decent job prospects and economic opportunities. Despite all the adversities, with strong religious fundamentals, the participants have developed self-identity and have also built inner spiritual strengths to face the uncertainties in their life as refugees.

The language barrier discussed above coupled with other constraints, Participant 10 and 11 shared their concerns that hinder them from extending help to their community:

I want to help but I don’t know how and I myself have problems.

I don’t know where to go if my friends need help.

I don’t have UNHCR card and sometimes it’s difficult to go out; afraid will be caught.

Despite their good intentions, these participants unfolded their constraints which are closely related to their ability to socially navigate themselves and others to thrive living in the host country.

DISCUSSION

An Emerging Framework

The frequency counts of the baseline test and the themes from the need analysis study: Zero English Language Proficiency, Different Alphabetical System, Interest in Learning English, and Religion—being Muslims which are the crucial elements to socially navigate in the host country, have led to an emerging Literacy Framework suitable for literacy training for the refugees. “The acquisition of literacy does not only involve knowledge (such as the alphabet, script, and language) and skills (like reading fluency and comprehension), but touches also on attitudes, dispositions and motivation as well as on values” (Hanemann, 2018, p. 24). As further surmised by Hanemann (2018), literacy is best described as a competency rather than just a “skill”. Hence, Hanemann’s concept of literacy and the four themes from the need analysis study form a strong basis for a literacy training framework for refugees with a combination of three components i.e. functional literacy, leadership skills and Islamic psycho-spiritual. The mapping of the themes and link with the three components in the emerging framework is shown in Figure 1.

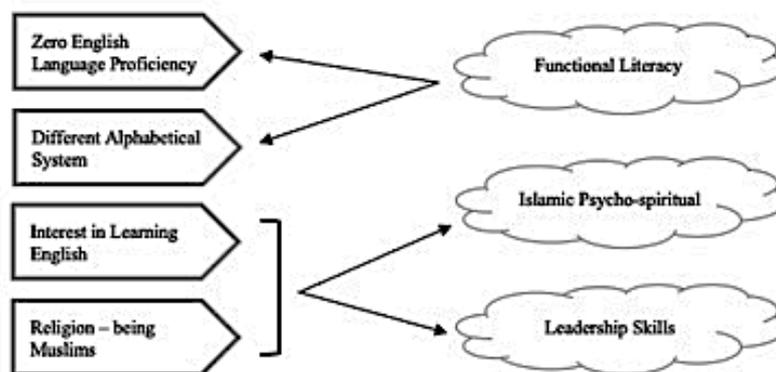


Figure 1. Mapping of the themes to core components of an emerging framework for Literacy Training for Refugees.

Functional Literacy

Given the complexity of language and the multi-faceted character of literacy, the field is starting to ‘unpack literacy’ and explore its various dimensions (Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Based on the data from the need analysis study, various literacy dimensions need to be considered in training refugees to enhance better literacy reception because the themes (Zero English Language Proficiency, Interest in Learning English and Different Alphabetical System) support the need for inclusion of various dimension. These include (1) individual and interpersonal dimensions, (2) social and cultural dimensions, (3) political and economic dimensions, (4) affective and expressive dimensions, (5) linguistic and metalinguistic dimensions, (6) cognitive and metacognitive dimensions, and (7) perceptual and mechanical dimensions (Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Therefore, in developing the literacy training module for the refugees, one or more of these dimensions will be incorporated to create a ‘literacy mosaic’ depending on the needs, training time and resources available. However, functional literacy alone does not suffice to equip the refugees to become the agent of change to their community but rather two other combinations i.e. Leadership Skills and Islamic Psycho-spiritual are deemed essential based on the data/themes from the needs analysis study.

Islamic Psycho-spiritual

The other theme, Religion-being Muslim, delineates that religion has developed the powerful bond that ignites the refugees’ willingness to extend assistance although they also unfolded their uncertainty on the ways and resources available, to be of help. Moreover, their religion has bonded them together during trying times at many levels and has become their source of guidance. Hence, the theme suggests the relevance of the Islamic Psycho-spiritual component to be included in the emerging model for refugees literacy training module for a few reasons. Firstly, fundamentals of *Iman*, Islam and *Ihsan* have possessed them with inner strength and bond as well as intention to help other fellow refugees. With strong religious fundamentals of *Iman*, Islam and *Ihsan*, the participants has developed self-identity and has built inner spiritual strengths to face the uncertainties in their life as refugees.

Islam has five pillars which are (1) the two testimonies of faith (*La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad Rasul Allah*; There is no God but God, Muhammad is God’s Messenger), (2) the five daily canonical prayers, (3) zakat, (4) fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, and (5) the hajj. Beyond that, the religion consists of six articles of faith or *Iman* (meaning literally “faith in God”), and then *Ihsan* (meaning “excellence” but implying virtue through constant regard to, and

awareness of God) (Muhammad, 2012). Furthermore, Muhammad (2012) explains that *Iman* (faith) differs from mere submission (Islam) in the sense that it is not primarily an act of the will, or of wanting to believe, but rather of actual sincerity in believing in God in one's (subtle) heart (*qalb*). To a certain extent, faith also engages the intelligence, the memory and intuition in the worship of God. Islam and *Iman* are the basic dimensions which focus on activity (Islam) and accepting (*Iman*) as defined in the Hadith while the third aspect, *Ihsan* (doing what is beautiful) focuses on human intentionality (Rahman, 2014). If Islam entails performing the fundamental rights, and *Iman* entails doing good deeds and avoiding evil ones, then *Ihsan* entails being virtuous as such even when one is not doing anything or cannot do anything (Muhammad, 2012).

Therefore, the process of social navigation for survival of the Muslim refugees must be pivoted within the Islamic fundamental principles of Islam, *Iman* and *Ihsan*. These principles will create a solid pillar towards fulfilling all their needs in developing a strong support system to the refugees in providing an impactful engagement to their community. As it will also strengthen their relationship with all humankind as they have strengthened their bond with Allah within the Islamic psychospiritual foundations, this component will be incorporated in the emerging framework to develop a wholesome training module to train the Rohingya youth refugees to become social navigators for their community.

Leadership Skills

Interest in Learning English, another theme sieved through from the need analysis study, can be linked to leadership ability and the obligation or responsibility that one should possess in order to extent help to others.

Refugee leadership development builds the capacity of refugees to lead sustainable, empowered lives. As leaders, refugees can work to strengthen the resources and networks in their own communities. The focus of refugee leadership development should be on developing the abilities to provide effective leadership and not the leadership mechanics to better ensure that refugee leaders stay engaged and committed. In the interest of identifying and growing leadership for refugee community, it is essential for the community leaders to master their communication skills by commuting messages to and from communities. Furthermore, the skills can play a crucial role in providing the interest of informing, empowering, and strengthening their community. Individuals with natural leadership skills, may reach out to the specific community members and encourage them to take part in activities or capacity building initiatives and also to increase refugee representation and strengthened accountability.

Towards building the capacity and providing resources of the refugee to identify and facilitate the growth of leadership skill in refugee communities, it is suggested that refugee leadership to build their skills in 'Decision Making', 'Communication,' and 'Problem Solving.'

Decision Making

Leaders make decisions about what to do, how to do it, when, why, with whom, for how long, assuming what, and resulting in what. Sometimes those decisions result in positive outcomes, sometimes not. Sometimes decisions are made alone, sometimes with others, but always relative to others. Regardless of one's actions, a decision is always made, even if it is the decision to not decide. Decision-making is perhaps one of the most important facets of leadership, and critical to the development of a leader. Leaders make decisions based on priorities aligned with their values, experience and knowledge within the consequences of those decisions. Refugee leaders participate in the decision-making process mostly when their involvement will enhance the quality of the decision made. Therefore, to clearly understand the process of decision making, (refugee) leaders must define what the future should look like, aligns with that vision, and inspire them to make it happen despite the challenges and obstacles involved (Ejimabo, 2015). Refugee leadership need to be enhanced with their decision-making skills towards developing their community to survive better towards their future upbringing.

Communication

Communication capabilities largely portray the notion that a communicator has the interaction objectives to achieve at both suitable and useful levels. Communication competency within this context serves as one of the main pillars that leads the leader's potential to leave a positive influence on their communities. In this respect, refugee leadership style and communication competency could be seen as the fundamental dynamics affecting the satisfaction of their communities. Communication professionals and organisational leaders have recognised the importance of applying appropriate leadership skills and styles in various situations to achieve both communication and organisational objectives (Jin et al., 2017). Therefore, to develop an efficient refugee leader, the need to enhance their communication skills is vital. Although these refugee leaders have vast good and bad experiences in their personal lives, communication skills are extremely important especially when it comes to leading positions as they have many 'listeners' within their community. The refugee leader should also uphold the idea that through communication their communities can develop intensive knowledge exchange and in the end the leaders can create a shared understanding of common goals and visions.

Problem Solving

A strong refugee leader must have the capacity and skills to anticipate, identify, solve, prevent, and learn from problems that occur in their community. Problem-solving skills require positive processes that incorporate communication skills, respect for all parties involved, and innovative approaches. When problems are viewed as "opportunities", the benefits for both leaders and community members can be highly positive. A leader can either react to problems and the resulting change, or look ahead and visualise the future with creative problem solving. Efficient leaders should anticipate change and learn how to facilitate and manage it. A leader does not have to wait until problems

come to him. Good leaders should seek solutions before the problems land on the doorstep. Teaching problem solving skills to refugee leaders will enhance and build their ability to a creative problem-solving capacity and willingness to view problems or challenges from a new perspective and to seek innovation in exploring potential options. Refugee leaders who are able to focus on what is most important and what they can most influence will advance their personal problem-solving skills.

Therefore, the three skills would make up one part of emerging frameworks as they are expected to complement each other and act as a medium to assist and equip the Rohingya youth refugees with leadership skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, a framework has emerged from the need analysis study. This framework has incorporated 'Functional Literacy', 'Leadership Skills' and 'Islamic Psycho-spiritual' principles and will be used as a guide in developing a training module for the Rohingya youth refugees (Figure 2).

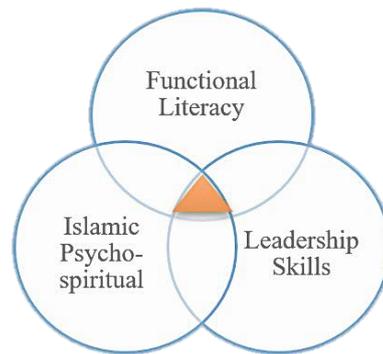


Figure 2. A Framework for Refugees Literacy Training for Social Navigation.

Youth empowerment is an important mechanism for social change. A fundamental step towards ensuring that these Rohingya youth refugees can participate in and contribute to the creation of a society that recognises and values their humanity is crucial. By grooming youths to become future leaders for their community through the literacy training module, resettlement issues are hoped to be resolved to a certain extent. The literacy training module, which is interweaved with Islamic elements and values, will help to ensure its youths and substantial portion of adults to achieve literacy. Being literate in the host country's language and the English language will enhance their employment opportunities, and therefore improve their life. This will also bring advantages to Malaysia in terms of long-term economic benefits, as well as enhancing Malaysia's pool of human capital.

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