

Iranian-Islamic Culture in ELT: Exploiting Shahnameh and Masnavi in Iranian TEFL

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Abstract:

Regarding the requisite role of EFL learners' native culture alongside the target culture in TEFL in the globalization era, the present paper discusses the advantages of teaching EFL learners' national and local culture through local literature in TEFL and then elaborates on the potentiality of teaching Iranian-Islamic culture through Persian Literature in Iranian TEFL. Consequently, among many invaluable works of Persian Literature, Shahnameh and Masnavi are introduced as rich sources of Iranian-Islamic culture which can be employed in TEFL in Iran. Including the deep teachings of these two prominent works of Persian Literature in TEFL in Iran is one of the effective ways through which the Iranian-Islamic moral principles and attitudes can be fostered in EFL learners and the sublime messages of Ferdowsi and Mowlana can be passed down to the generations. Applying the idea will be beneficial not only to Iranian EFL learners during their language learning but also to the whole Iranian society in the long term.

Keywords: *TEFL, culture, literature, Iranian- Islamic culture, Shahnameh, Masnavi*

1. Introduction

Literature offers many merits pedagogically. By reading literature, students' knowledge and experience of the world can be extended and by constructing meaning from the literary texts, students can see the world from varied perspectives (Khatib & Rahimi, 2012). As a potent source of culturally-loaded material, literature has been long used in language teaching. "Language is a central aspect of cultural cognition in that it serves as a 'collective memory bank' for cultural conceptualisations that have prevailed at different stages in the history of a speech community" (Sharifian, 2011, p. 44). With respect to the inextricable and interdependent relationship between language and culture, considerable attention has been paid to the teaching of culture in English Language Teaching (ELT). After listening, speaking, reading and writing, culture is considered as the fifth language skill which must be taken into account in language teaching (Damen, 1987, cited in Abdollahi-Guilani et al., 2012; Hong, 2008, cited in Özüorçun, 2014; Shahed, 2013).

Trying to develop an appropriate pedagogy for the teaching of English as an International Language (EIL), McKay (2003b) believes that "the traditional use of Western cultural content in ELT texts needs to be examined" (p.19). Regarding the fact that a considerable portion of the cultural content in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Iran has been allocated to target culture, English as a compulsory subject at schools and a necessity for higher education in Iran, needs to be examined culturally. Studying the current status of ELT from cultural point of view in Iran, indicates that national culture needs to be fostered through appropriate material.

In today's world, globalization and communication among different nations through universal media, internet, satellite as well as travel and migration affect different aspects of human existence and consequently man's national and universal identity which is the domain of thought, culture and civilization will be influenced (Mohammadnezhad & Badavi, 2013). In such a situation, the nation that is aware of its cultural values and appreciates them, can both preserve and promote its culture and identity. Persian Literature which conveys messages of Iranian-Islamic culture and civilization can be exploited to achieve this very aim (ibid). Boroomand et al. (2014) contend, despite the fact that Persian Literature is a part of Iranian EFL learners' cultural heritage, incorporation of Persian Literature into ELT in Iran has been ignored. Among many valuable works of Persian Literature, the present paper introduces Shahnameh and Masnavi as rich and effective sources of Iranian and Islamic culture which can be employed in TEFL in Iran.

2. Culture in TEFL

Culture is defined as "the pattern of meanings embedded in symbolic forms, including actions, utterances, and meaningful objects of various kinds, by which individuals communicate with one another and share their experiences, conceptions, and beliefs" (Thompson, 1990, p.132, cited in Roohani & Molana, 2013). "language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other" (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 235, cited in Choudhury, 2013). Additionally, "Since culture is crystalized in human beings' everyday

language, it is impossible to separate these two in teaching EFL” (Nasirahmadi et al., 2014, p. 1325).

Brooks (1968, 1997) makes a distinction between “formal culture” (literature, fine arts, history, etc.) and “deep culture” (patterns of social interactions, values, attitudes, etc.) (cited in Frank, 2013). It is a necessity to teach culture as the fifth language skill in language pedagogy to avoid or minimize misunderstandings where the language is used by its native speakers (Özüorçun, 2014).

Cortazzi and Jin, (1996) state that three types of cultural information can be used in language textbooks and materials:

- 1) *target culture materials* that use the culture of a country where English is spoken as a first language;
- 2) *source culture materials* that draw on the learners’ own culture as content; and
- 3) *international target culture materials* that use a great variety of cultures in English and non-English speaking countries around the world (cited in McKay, 2004).

3. Literature in TEFL

Literature has retained a special place in TEFL for a long time due to its engaging nature as well as its many pedagogical advantages. Collie and Slater (1990) mention four main reasons for the beneficial use of literature in EFL classrooms: 1. valuable authentic material 2. cultural enrichment 3. language enrichment 4. personal involvement (cited in Khatib et al., 2012).

Exposing EFL/ESL learners to literary texts can expand their vocabulary and syntactic knowledge (Khatib et al., 2011). Listening, speaking, reading and writing as the four language skills can be developed through using literature in EFL/ESL classrooms (Erkaya, 2005; Khatib et al., 2011). The requirements of humanistic language teaching in ESL/EFL contexts can be satisfied by the integration of literature into second or foreign language teaching (Khatib & Ahmadi, 2012). Critical thinking, motivation and emotional intelligence which are some of different aspects of humanism, can all be enhanced through the integration of literature into second or foreign language teaching (Boroomand et al., 2014). Literature “enlarges students’ vision and fosters critical thinking” (Oster, 1989, p.85, cited in Khatib & Rahimi, 2012). Literature-based activities have positive effect on EFL learners’ emotional intelligence (Shiriyani & Nejadansari, 2014). Employing literature as the content of instruction in ELT, promotes teachers and learners’ creativity in an EFL classroom (Zaker, 2016). In addition to motivating students, using literature in TEFL improves EFL learners’ performance and competence in the language (Arabi et al., 2014).

Boroomand et al. (2014) suggest that literature can be employed as a rich source of material for *life syllabus* proposed by Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012a). This kind of syllabus takes life issues into special consideration and enables language learners to tackle the problems they may face in life. With their rich nature and multiple layers of meaning, literary texts are appropriate for classroom discussion (Chiang, 2007, cited in Khatib & Seyyedrezaei, 2013).

4. Teaching Culture through Literature

The relationship between literature and culture is not deniable. The first and the best way to conduct a research on a group of people or a nation is to study their literature which results in a thorough understanding of their culture (Khatib & Teimourtash, 2012). “So it is hard to ignore the cultural benefits of studying literature, since literature mirrors national culture” (Aghagolzadeh & Tajabadi, 2012, p. 207). Regarding the significance of culture in ELT, literature as a potent source of culturally-loaded material has been long addressed in language teaching. Rezaee and Farahian (2011) mention that using literary works is one of the best ways to teach culture and cultural issues in ELT context.

Nowadays thanks to the translation of world’s eminent literary works to different languages, literature has become a means of introducing nations’ cultures and a key to open their closed cultural doors. Through reading different countries’ poems and stories, people can be aware of the cultural aspects of other nations’ lives all around the world. This kind of awareness can result in cultural relationship of societies and also establishing dialogues among different cultures, religions and civilizations (Razi, 2012). Teaching / learning literature and culture interactively is a strategic frame that results in international understanding and developing a sense of tolerance facing others’ differences. This way cultural barriers will be transformed into cultural bridges (Ghouti & Mohammed, 2014).

Considering EIL perspective and with regard to the possibility of teaching culture through literature, two main issues can be discussed: 1. Fostering local culture through local literature 2. Developing EFL learners’ national identity.

4.1. Fostering Local Culture through Local Literature

“In dealing with the linguistic and pedagogical aspect of culture in language teaching, what is needed is a full recognition that English today has become denationalized. Hence, it is local educators who need to determine what linguistic information, cultural content, and teaching methodology are most appropriate for the local context so that learners will be able to use English to tell others about their own culture” (McKay, 2003a, cited in Khatib et al., 2012). Regarding the fact that English no longer belongs to any one’s culture, McKay (2003b) states that using source culture content not only minimizes the potential of marginalizing the learners’ values and lived experiences, but also encourages these learners to gain a deeper understanding of their own culture so that they can share these insights with individuals from other cultures while using EIL.

Alwasilah (2006) emphasizes the necessity of employing ethnic and local literature in Indonesian EFL context which results in cultural revitalization. “cultural revitalization is a process of identifying, socializing, reinterpreting and applying cultural values all of which are essentially facilitated by education in schools and beyond” (ibid, p.20). Naji Meidani and Pishghadam (2013) mention the importance of scientific and systematic localization movement through creation of local materials by material designers. Using local culture texts stimulates students’ motivation in reading

comprehension (Royani, 2013). Translated folktales and learners' native stories with their familiar culture increase EFL learners' motivation and facilitate vocabulary enrichment (Cevik & Spahiu, 2013). Prastiwi (2013) states that in Indonesia, EFL teachers at primary schools incorporate translated Indonesian folktales into ELT to introduce local culture to learners and also enhance their sense of belonging to local culture. That is to say, these folktales translated into English can be employed not only as a medium for teaching EFL but also as a means of conveying local and national culture to EFL learners.

4.2. Developing EFL Learners' National Identity

Culture is undoubtedly the most salient and the richest source of identity and that's why people of different societies are always differentiated and identified by their cultural elements (Mohammadnezhad & Badavi, 2013). The results of the study made by Saboori et al. (2015) reveals a significant relationship between cultural dimensions and the identity components. "An indirect way of strengthening a particular identity component is through emphasizing and working on the associating or the predicting cultural dimension" (ibid, p. 71).

"Language learning and identity are interrelated, each influencing the other" (Khatib & Ghamari, 2011, p. 1706). The results of the study made by Mostafaei Alaei and Ghamari (2014) in Iran, show that EFL learners at the beginning levels have stronger affinity to their own national identity compared to EFL learners in more advanced levels. "Exposure to the language will affect the language learners' identity and ultimately their culture, and since English possesses a dominant nature, the EFL learners quite indirectly get affected by this dominance and show detachment from their own culture that may have more constraints" (Hejazi & Hosseini Fatemi, 2015, p. 121). Bazri et al. (2013) point out that "if the language learners lose respect for and pride in their own heritage, tradition, and culture, they will gradually lose their sense of solidarity with their national identity" (p.4, cited in Hejazi & Hosseini Fatemi, 2015).

McKay (2002) argues that through using the source culture, EFL students can be empowered to use English to express their own culture and identity (cited in Khatib et al., 2012). Pishghadam and Naji (2012) also assert that "in order to highlight home culture identity, ELT materials certainly need to include local culture" (p. 47).

Prastiwi (2013) contends that Indonesian students' national identity can be constructed through employing Indonesian folktales translated into English in EFL classes. EFL learners' Folktales as a representation of national culture, can help these learners find their place in the increasingly globalized world (ibid). Boroomand et al. (2014) state that incorporation of Persian Literature as a part of Iranian EFL learners' cultural heritage, into ELT in Iran, can foster their sense of national identity.

5. Current Cultural Status of TEFL in Iran

The way in which culture is represented in ELT in Iran, seems to follow an unbalanced content. The content orientation of English language books and educational tools is in a way that leads students' intellectual tendency and individual inclinations towards

culture of English speaking countries (Ghahari, 2013). Ziaei (2012) investigated the cross-cultural issues in four volumes of an English textbook – American English File – taught in some of Iran EFL institutes. The results show that the UK and the USA are the most frequent mentioned countries in the reading texts, while Iran as an Asian country has no room in these books. Deconstructing the patterns of cultural representations and intercultural interactions, Roohani and Molana (2013) tried to evaluate the *Interchange* textbooks, an ELT textbook series taught to EFL learners in Iran. According to the results of their study, dominance of male and white characters and the US culture indicated inequality in race and gender and the superficial treatment of culture in the textbooks. Through qualitative content analysis, Bahrainy (2013) made an attempt to study the cultural values depicted in a set of English books (Impact, Conversation Series) taught in some language institutes in Iran. The results of her study demonstrate that in addition to language knowledge, these English books transfer cultural values of the English native speakers to the learners. Consequently, the imported English books are one of the means of imposing cultural values on language learners (ibid).

Ahmadi (2013) evaluated Iranian and non-Iranian English books in ELT from cultural point of view and came to the conclusion that non-Iranian ELT books were much more successful in conveying their culture; on the contrary, Iranian ELT books were not successful in indicating their culture. Hejazi and Hosseini Fatemi (2015) conducted a study on Iranian university students to find out whether studying English as a major would affect the degree of learners' home culture detachment. The results revealed that non-EFL university students were more attached to their home culture than EFL university students. In other words, EFL students were more detached from their local culture than non-EFL students.

Recognizing the use of English as a global language, English educators today, need to consider how English is embedded in the local context so that they can develop an appropriate pedagogy (McKay, 2004). Considering the present cultural status of ELT in Iran, Pishghadam and Navari (2009) contend that the type of relationship between English and Persian does not result in positive mutual enrichment, mutual development and mutual renovation. Namely, English culture's norms and values are accepted completely and unquestionably in a process of acculturation. As a result, Persian culture may lose its uniqueness and become a part of English culture (ibid).

Rajabi and Ketabi (2012) contend that in EFL education in Iran, intercultural understanding should be emphasized. Namely, learners not only should be exposed to the target language culture but also should be introduced to Persian culture in English. Emphasizing the importance of including the local specificities of the Iranian culture and religion, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012b) come up with the notion of Iranian TEFL and call for localization of TEFL in Iran with respect to Iran's local conditions and Iranian EFL learners' local needs.

6. Iranian-Islamic Culture and Identity in Persian Literature

Close study of Persian texts of prose and verse shows that the word “culture” [“فرهنگ”] with its conceptual characteristics has an old background of 14 centuries.

Various practical fields are found for the word “culture” [“فرهنگ”] in Persian language and literature. Namely, it sometimes amounts to all good qualities such as bravery, wisdom, experience, skill, knowledge, etc. and in some cases it is employed for more limited meanings or even a specific meaning (Ansari Pooya, et al. ,2015).

Iranian culture which thoroughly reflects Iranian beliefs and thoughts, and the perfection of Iranian society which has been based on the appreciation of rightness in thoughts, speeches and deeds can be clearly seen in Persian Literature (Gorjy, 2002). The impressionability of Persian Literature from Islamic teachings is not deniable. In other words, Iranian poets and authors, created great literary works under the influence of Islamic culture (Alizdeh, 2012). Therefore, the cultural dimension of classical Persian Literature is contiguous to the religious beliefs and instructions (Razi, 2012). After converting to Islam, the Iranian accepted Islamic principles and integrated them into instructions of Iranian culture. Consequently, they established an Islamic-Iranian identity (Ghobadi, 2009). Persian literature which is intermingled with Iranian identity confirms that Iranian identity is not static and constricted. It is not the result of prejudice and narrow-mindedness but while being Iranian, it is humane and universal. Namely, following Quranic instructions, it brings rescue, peace and security for the whole people in the world (ibid).

Presenting a psychological image of Iranian spirit, historical events in the course of time indicate preserving genuine cultural bases alongside dealing consciously with other civilizations (Hejazi, 2007). In time of foreigners’ invasion and domination, Iranians defended their identity through nationalism while they had scientific, cultural and political relations with other nations in time of power and peace. That’s why Iranian identity has been the paradoxical reflection of nationalism and meta-nationalism in the ups and downs of history. The development of Persian Literature from Ferdowsi’s nationalism to Mowlana’s meta-nationalism or humanism is the early step towards a universal identity (ibid). Shahnameh –which contains ideals and longings of human world- and Masnavi –with its intuitional knowledge and sublime teachings which is compatible to consciousness and unconsciousness of human mind- exemplify Iranian-Islamic culture much more effectively than any other Persian literary work (Mohammadnezhad & Badavi, 2013).

6.1. Shahnameh

The Shahnameh (The Book of Kings or The Epic of Persian Kings) is a long epic poetry, consisting of some 50,000 couplets, written by Ferdowsi about 1000 years ago. Ferdowsi put the ancient Iranian legends and myths into verse and spent over 30 years on accomplishing his masterpiece i.e. between 977 and 1010 AD. His major source in creating the Shahnameh was a prose epic called the Shahnameh of Abu-Mansur. He also employed other ancient writings and oral narratives. The Shahnameh is divided into three successive parts: the mythical, heroic and historical ages. It begins with the creation of the world and ends with the Muslim-Arab conquest of the Persian empire in 651 AD. The work is of great importance in Persian culture and identity.

Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh includes narrative history of Iran (Safa, 1999, p. 168). It is the greatest capital of our national culture with respect to its role in keeping old national

narratives as well as its significant effect on protecting Dari Persian (ibid). Iranian identity has been preserved in the light of Shahnameh's content with its unique characteristics among which is the political, geographical and historical unity. After Ferdowsi, Iranian identity continued not in a united political and religious context but in a cultural, literary and artistic area (Khatibi, 2007). Iranian identity in Shahnameh doesn't have its significance in contempt of other nations but it is based on strong philosophical, spiritual and ethical principles. The Iranian can preserve their identity through these bases especially in today's world in which many native cultures are at risk of being forgotten (ibid).

Belonging to the realm of culture and literature, Shahnameh relates the pre-Islamic era to the post Islamic time and reveals rationalism and piety as the cornerstone of Iranians' culture and identity (Khosravi & Mousavi, 2008). In Ferdowsi's view what relates and unites intellect and piety is benevolence. In other words, benevolence is the desired value of piety and intellect in Shahnameh. Iranians' perception of the compatibility and harmony between intellect and piety is what makes Iranian culture outstanding during history (ibid). The concept of intellect has the highest frequency in Shahnameh and Ferdowsi elaborates on the roles and functions of intellect in Man's life. Concerning the concept of intellect in Shahnameh, the origins of Ferdowsi's thoughts and descriptions have their roots in both Iranian and Islamic cultures (Sarfi, 2004). Considering the fact that Shahnameh is a prominent literary work belonging to all times, Khalili Ardali (2012) suggests that new generations' needs can be met by cultural packages extracted from Shahnameh.

6.2. Masnavi-Ma'navi

Masnavi-Ma'navi, a series of six books of poetry written in Persian by Mowlana, contains around 25,000 verses. Mowlana -also known as Rumi in many countries- began composing the Masnavi at the request of one of his best disciples and continued accomplishing it until his death in 1273 AD. Masnavi-Ma'navi includes anecdotes and stories derived from the Holy Quran, Hadith sources and everyday tales through which Mowlana tries to convey mystical and spiritual teachings, moral principles and Islamic wisdom.

Zarrincoob (1995) contends that paying careful attention to the details of people's daily life is one of Mowlana's characteristics which provides interesting and precise thoughts and also creates a more realistic atmosphere in Masnavi (cited in Fathollahi & Sahraei, 2013). In the light of Quranic knowledge and under the influence of Islamic culture, Mowlana uncovers the inner layers of human soul to show the roots of man's deep emotions. Mowlana makes a special effort to introduce ways for man's success in his worldly life as well as his spiritual growth through presenting particular skills which are compatible with his school of mystical teachings (Fathollahi & Sahraei, 2013).

Education is the most important purpose of Mowlana. He tries to teach the ways of achieving human perfection. As Barani and Golafshani (2012) state Masnavi is the ocean of educational and didactic virtues. Gorjy (2002) discusses the effective role that Masnavi can take on in the dialogue among cultures, civilizations and religions.

7. Concluding Remarks

In addition to conserving human culture in different periods, literature has been a significant factor in culture instruction and development and an important means of conveying cultural values from generation to generation. It has also been a way of introducing a nation's culture to other societies (Razi, 2012). In the absence of today's media, literature had the key role in educating culture including ideology, religion and mysticism. It is taking part in educating cultural concepts in the present time (ibid). In language pedagogy also, many researchers (Ghosn, 2002; Van, 2009; Rezaee & Farahian, 2011) have emphasized the potential of literature in culture instruction.

In the globalization era, explicit and implicit addressing of the elements of target culture as well as home culture is necessary in the field of TEFL. The motto "global thinking, local teaching" composed by Kramsch and Sullivan (1996, p.200) needs to be taken into special consideration for the teaching of English as an international language (McKay, 2004). With respect to the fact that teaching a foreign language carries a novel culture with itself and additionally considering the effective role of literature –with its rich cultural content- in language teaching, Shafieyan (2011) emphasizes that being aware of Iranian students' cultural background as well as the differences between Iranian culture and the Anglo-American one is of great significance in language teaching in Iran. Nasirahmadi et al. (2014) discuss that culture teaching in ELT, by developing a kind of critical thinking in EFL learners, gives them a chance to compare their L1 culture with L2 culture. Besides enhancing EFL learners' intercultural competence, this gives them a kind of "meta-cultural awareness" to create a dynamic and developmentally ever-changing cultural system. In other words, teaching culture in EFL classrooms provides EFL learners with an opportunity to reconsider their cultural system and appreciate, modify and probably reject and replace it (ibid). Bazri et al. (2013) believe that while appreciating the foreign culture, EFL learners need to promote their own culture and national values (cited in Hejazi & Hosseini Fatemi, 2015). This helps them avoid home culture detachment which is an impact of linguistic imperialism (Hejazi & Hosseini Fatemi, 2015).

As language contains a culture's values and ideologies, TEFL must be exploited for more comprehension of the human essence and identity and also self-knowledge through proper policies and educational decision making (Parsaiyan et al., 2014a.). "Regrettably, despite the richness of our Muslim Iranian culture and its world renowned artistic and literary heritage, there have rarely been serious attempts to capitalize on this richness" (Parsaiyan et al., 2014b, p. 93). Boroomand et al. (2014) assert that incorporation of Persian Literature into ELT can prevent Iranian society from cultural imperialism and self-alienation in the globalization era. Considering globalization with its different aspects, Mohammadnezhad and Badavi (2013) discuss that Persian Literature as an asset in the treasure of Iranian-Islamic culture can strongly support us to take steps towards cultural communication and interaction with the world without worry. Consequently, through exploiting the opportunities provided by wonderful development of communication and information technology, we can promote and foster our Iranian-Islamic culture as well as our national identity (ibid).

In a rare and complementary endeavor, Parsaiyan et al. (2014b), sought to explore the possibilities of opening spaces for English translations of Persian classic works of literature in EFL classrooms and tracing the language events that unfolded as a result of incorporating such literature. "The artistic, interpretative environments that were created, provided spaces for the language learners to dig into their collective identity, current lives, roots, and local wisdom to re/create a "familiar" language- the language which comes from their everyday lives and rooted in their beliefs, values, collective literary and spiritual legacy" (Parsaiyan et al., 2014b, p. 106). The results of the study made by Boroomand et al. (2016) show that employing old Persian stories in TEFL increases Iranian EFL learners' motivation and interest in Persian literature and also promotes their sense of national identity.

Unfortunately, today's encounter of the Iranian public with great works of Persian literature such as Shahnameh and Masnavi is not a kind of effective treatment based on knowledge and cognition (Khalili Ardali, 2012). Incorporating rich and deep teachings of Shahnameh and Masnavi into TEFL in Iran is one of the effective ways through which the sublime messages of Ferdowsi and Mowlana can be passed down to the generations. Simplified as well as sophisticated English translations of these two great literary works according to EFL learners' ages and proficiency levels, can be employed both in schools and private English classes as effective ELT material. As a necessity, a minute study must be made in order to introduce Iranian-Islamic cultural elements. Regarding the intellectual and spiritual concepts embedded in Shahnameh and Masnavi, Iranian-Islamic cultural elements must be extracted from these two masterpieces so that they can be exploited efficiently in Iranian pedagogical settings as well as ELT context. This will be beneficial not only to Iranian EFL learners during their language learning but also to the whole Iranian society in the long term. Hejazi (2007) states that in the present era, we have to put together Ferdowsi and Mowlana's basic thoughts. That is to say, on the one hand we must enhance our self-confidence and self-reliance and on the other hand in the light of humanism, we must abstain from any egotism and self-centeredness.

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