

Divine Perspectives in Designing English Language Teaching Materials: The Case of Teaching Body Organs to Young English Language Learners¹

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Abstract

Upon the continuing spread of English as the global language, there have been dissenting voices, albeit not resounding ones, from Muslim scholars lamenting the hegemony of Western patterns of thoughts and the relegation or denigration of Islamic ideology, values, and culture in education in general and English Language Teaching (ELT) curricular and pedagogic thinking in particular. Nonetheless, despite the current qualms, the practice of reviving language teachings based on Islamic sources and the socio-religious concerns of Muslim communities is still infrequent. Feeling the necessity of designing educational materials, I narrate an experience of composing nursery rhymes targeted at introducing body organs and their divine rights to young English learners through deriving inspiration from Islamic references like the Sublime Qur'an and Imam Sajjad's Trea-

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ties on Rights (*Risalat al-Huquq*). I hope the modest experience would be inspirational for other language teachers and materials developers interested in carving out identity and ownership in foreign language teaching.

Keywords: Materials design; English language teaching; Imam Sajjad's Treaties on Rights; Nursery rhymes; Young language learners.

Introduction

Over the last three decades, the growth and function of English as the global language has made it target of varied critical appraisals. Amongst, there have been voices from Muslim scholars in the Islamic societies critiquing the Western and European values and ideological patterns like “materialism, utilitarianism, skepticism, relativism, secularism and hedonism” (Al-Farquqi, 1986, p. 15) spearheaded through English language teaching; the corollaries from which Muslim children are not exempt (Adebayo, 2005; Karmani, 2005a; Mohd-Asraf, 2005; Muslim, Nafisah, & Damayanti, 2009; Zaki, 1982). Accordingly, there have been calls for confronting the world-wide penetration of secular intellectual traditions and educational policies that are antithetical to the Islamic worldviews in English teaching, and reviving teachings based on the Sublime Qur'an and prophetic traditions, with reference to Islamic values, history, civilization, heritage, culture and literature, and topics arising from Muslims' everyday life contexts (Ismail Ahmad Shah, Muhammad, & Mohamed Ismail, 2012; Shafi, 1983). This has progressively fueled an academic movement in a number of Muslim countries (like Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, Nigeria, just to mention a few) for Islamization and decolonization of contemporary knowledge in general and English teaching in particular, though it has not brought the dawn of a new era yet.

The situation of Iran, as an Islamic country with anti-Western policies on the one hand and as one of the devoted consumers, or purveyors, of Western theories, teaching methodologies, scholarly publications, pedagogical practices, and products on the other hand might make it ambiguous to determine the status of English language education in Iran. Not closing our eyes to other arenas, we can see that imported foreign coursebooks, with their other ancillary materials such as workbooks, CDs, DVDs, teacher guides, and more recently annexed interactive multimedia, and companion websites for both teachers and learners build the backbone of instruction in a good number of language institutes mushrooming around the country. To be on the safe edge, such coursebooks are presented to the local market with some degrees of monitoring by the Ministry of Education, including occasional sort of censorship or deletion of a few controversial subjects, contents, and images that are potentially at variance with Iranian-Islamic norms and values; though the so-called localization efforts may be seen as window dressing serving the interests of ELT industrial market.

This has occasionally spawned discussions among Iranian researchers, especially the critical discourse analysts, concerning the status and salience of linguistic imperialism and cultural invasion in imported ELT products. Various

investigations of ideological underpinnings in different domains of ELT, chiefly internationally distributed textbooks and their hidden curricula, have revealed the preponderance of socio-economic and political worldviews imbued with American and European lifestyles and norms like materialism, McDonaldization, neo-liberalism, capitalism, Western individualism, and consumerism (Ghahremani Ghajar & Poursaduqi, 2016; Kazemi, Aidinlou, & Davatgari Asl, 2017; Keshavarz & Akbari Malek, 2009; Taki, 2008). Though still open to dispute, such critical considerations have progressively resulted in professional calls for taking stock of English language teaching in Iran and figuring out effective solutions for the problems that “if not resolved, may put the cultural and religious identities of Iranian learners of English in jeopardy” (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2012, p. 58).

The issue has also been underscored by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei, over the last years. While expressing worries about the spread of foreign culture “among children, young adults and youths”, he is emphatic that “that does not mean opposition to learning a foreign language” or “terminating English language teaching at schools”, but having “specific plan for dealing with this issue”. To him, this heightens the necessity for “work” and “innovation” or in another word, “innovative work” on the part of policy-makers, materials developers, and language teachers.

Nonetheless, despite the current concerns and qualms, practical cases of “innovative work” derived from or rooted in Islamic-Iranian philosophical, academic, and intellectual traditions which can firmly keep abreast of the demands of modern, technologically-paced world are still infrequent. Much to our chagrin, the language policies planned and English textbooks developed, published, and distributed nationwide within the purview of the Textbook Curriculum Development and Planning Department of Ministry of Education have not yet fared well in meeting the needs of Iranian learners; despite the sporadic efforts made for localizing English education and protecting the national, cultural, and religious identity (Ataee & Mazloom, 2013; Dahmardeh, 2009; Khajavi & Abbasian, 2011). It seems that nearly four decades after the Islamic Revolution, there are still unresolved controversies concerning English language teaching in Iran!

As an Iranian-Muslim language teacher, with more than a decade experience of teaching English at language institutes and academes, the nature and content of knowledge produced and consumed in ELT textbooks— particularly those gaining their fame from their American and British publication industries— have turned into a riding concern to me. With a true desire to swim against the mainstream tide, I have long wondered how alternative views derived from Islamic- Iranian sources could possibly replace the current materials in language teaching, especially those targeted at young Iranian-Muslim EFL learners. This has frequently encouraged me to initiate or participate in similar academic adventures (Parsaiyan, Ghahremani-Ghajar, Salahimoghaddam, & Janahmadi, 2014, 2015 & 2016; Parsaiyan, Moslem Azar, Moslem Azar, & Zarrinfar, 2018).

The case in view is designing materials (nursery rhymes) targeted at teaching body organs to young English learners through deriving inspiration from Islamic references like the Sublime Qur'an, exegeses, and more particularly Imam Sajjad's Treaties on Rights (*Risalat al-Huquq*). In this complicated book, the holy Imam sophisticatedly elaborates on various types of duties, obligations, or responsibilities –known as rights (*Huquq*)– incumbent upon human beings that they ought to observe in their relationship with Allah and his creatures as well as the rights of the various organs of the body (like hands, mouth, nose, eyes, ears...). Benefiting from the help and consultation of a supportive community of experts, I got engaged in composing episodic nursery rhymes each aimed at introducing one of the body organs and explicating their rights in simple poetic language. The crux of the paper is to present some episodes from the composed poetry hoping that it may come inspirational to other language teachers and materials developers.

To depict a bigger picture, I start with a brief look at the concepts of Islamization of knowledge, Islamic English, and Islamic English language teaching in some Muslim countries.

Islamization of Knowledge and English Language Teaching

Although the concept of Islamization of knowledge has been the subject of vehement discussions over the last three decades, some trace its outset to the time of the holy Messenger of Islam (peace be upon him) himself and later to the Islamic Golden Ages like the time of Abbasid caliph, Ma-mun ibn Harun ar-Rashid, who founded a renowned Academic Research Centre known as Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad; a house which introduced a good number of eminent Muslim scholars and philosophers to the world (Hasan, 2014) and “was the center for translation from Greek, Syriac, and Pahlavi and which was the basis of a caliphal library that survived for more than a century” (Walbridge, 2006, p. 504). During this era, the emergence of different branches of science necessitated translating manuscripts from different languages into Arabic and vice versa. In other words, one can see that “the rise of a multilingual culture began during the Prophet's lifetime and remains ongoing” (Hasan, 2014, p.5).

However, the program of Islamization of knowledge came to a halt in the subsequent eras due to various factors like the Tartar and Crusader invasions, the advent of colonialism in the Islamic world, invasion of Western thoughts and consequently, relegation and stagnation of Islam and Muslims. Such political, economic, military, and intellectual colonialism and slavery instigated a drawn-out legacy of non-Islamic “educational dualism” (Kaosar Ahmed, 2014) in the Muslim world which is more an “imitation”, “copy” or “caricature” of Western education offered in the name of science and modernism, while being bereft of either Western vision or Islamic vision (AbuSulayman,1995).

It took centuries for the Muslim world to realize how the dim glow of the Islamic education and its replacement with Western education has played havoc

with their civilization, ideology, and identity, the least of which is the way “Muslim youth are being Westernized by Muslim teachers in Muslim Universities” (AbuSulayman, 1995, p. 18). This gradually instigated calls for a genuine revival of education system based on Islamic principles, objectives, values, and spiritual legacy.

Al-Attas, a prominent Malaysian philosopher in the contemporary Muslim world, in his classic book, *Islam and Secularism* (1978), defines Islamization of modern knowledge as an “epistemological revolution” aimed at “the liberation of man first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition opposed to Islam, and then from secular control over his reason and his language” (p.45). He ventures to maintain a firm critique that Western sciences and their philosophical underpinnings are fallacious due to their adherence to empirical experimentations, rational reasoning, veneration of secular logic, and negation of metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of the reality. He espouses that this view of knowledge is in contrast with Islamic knowledge which hinges primarily on revealed truth and the concept of Tawhid (recognition of Allah as the only absolute Creator). In such a perspective, Islamic education should gear towards harmonious and holistic development of human beings through nurturing physical, mental, social, emotional, ethical, moral, and religious capacities while the ultimate goal is submission or servitude to Allah and his commandments (Alavi, 2013; Shariatmardai, 2011).

Such an Islamic vigor has raised concerns or even vehement debates around the ways through which emerging modern issues and contemporary disciplines such as sociology, economics, politics, banking and finance, philosophy, education, and the humanities should be defined, re-defined, interpreted, and enacted based on Islamic principles (Uddin & Mazumder, 2014). Amongst, an issue which has progressively gained momentum is the murky domain of English language teaching and Islam (Ashraf, 1987; Casewit, 1985; Shafi, 1983; Pennycook, 2017).

Although Allah the Almighty in the Sublime Qur’an holds a firm position on multilingualism by pointing out “And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors: verily in that are signs for those who know” (The Sublime Qur’an, 30: 22), and hence encourages the humans to appreciate the existing linguistic and cultural diversity, history reveals “a tinge of antagonism between English and Islam” (Hasan, 2014, p. 4). This cynical view is attributed to various causes including the nexus between English teaching and colonialism and missionary works purported at converting non-Christian local populations to Christians via English teaching and promulgating anti-Islamic values (Karmani, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2006; Pennycook, 2017; Varghese & Johnson, 2007). For instance, Mohd-Asraf (2005), in tracing the history of English language in Malaysia, referred to the establishment of English-medium schools by British colonizers with the aim of spreading Christian faith, and how many Muslim Malay parents at that time were hesitant to send their children to such schools as they “feared that their children might be Christianized” (p.110).

Nonetheless, after the Second World War (1939-1945) and upon the economic and political ascendance of the United States (Canagarajah & Said, 2011; Pennycook, 2017; Shin & Kubota, 2008), more and more non-English speakers including Muslims found English instrumental for their future careers, access to information, scientific and technological advancement, and economic growth. Today, Muslims constitute a large number of English speakers (both as native and non-native ones) exceeding to several hundred million in number (Ali, 2007), among whom are renowned philosophers, scholars, educators, researchers, writers, and poets communicating in English.

In line with this boost, there are also vivid policies and planned programs by former owners of English language for setting English teaching programs in Muslim countries. For instance, James K. Glassman, the executive director of George W. Bush Institute, in the *Strategic Public Diplomacy* published in 2010 speaks about annual budget allocation and serious attempts for firming up language teaching programs in the Muslim world:

As for English, the United States teaches it because the world wants to learn it – because governments and people in practically every country in the world see English as a way to move up economically. Everywhere, including difficult neighborhoods like Yemen, the West Bank and Gaza. In teaching English, we teach a language and tell America’s story. Spending on English teaching programs by the State Department has risen from \$6.8 million in fiscal 2004 to \$46.6 million this year (*Strategic Public Diplomacy*, 2010, p. 15).

Such encounters between Muslims and English have led to a number of linguistic, ideological, and methodological debates (Karmani & Pennycook, 2005; Pennycook, 2017). At linguistic level, a rising concern expressed by a number of Muslim scholars is mistranslation or inappropriate translation of Arabic Islamic words and concepts to English, particularly those carrying “divine providence” (Ali, 2001; Al-Faruqi, 1986; Othman & Lotfie, 2013). Al-Faruqi, in his seminal book, *Toward Islamic English* (1986), explicated the way transliteration and distortions in translation of Islamic theological terminologies into foreign languages like the names and attributes of Allah and Islamic rituals obscure the true original meaning of such terminologies –as held by the Muslims in their social and religious lives– and “mutilate” them as biblical Western equivalents. For example, he argues that Islamic terms “salaah” and “zakaah” have erroneously been translated as “prayer” and “charity or alms”, respectively, while the original Arabic concepts have very specific connotations. Accordingly, he propounded that Muslims should attempt for Islamizing English language in accordance with the Islamic community’s intellectual and cultural requirements. To maintain the original flavor of such untranslatable Islamic terms and to protect them from incorrect spelling, semantic loss, distortion, and mistranslation, he proposed creation of a distinct brand of English marked by integration of original Arabic terms. To him, Islamic English is “not really a violation of English. Rather, it is an enrichment” (Al-Faruqi, 1986, p. 12).

Espousing the notion of Islamic English, Lallmamode and Adam (2009) explored the awareness of Islamic English of nearly thirty Muslim students from different nationalities studying in five Muslim countries. The researchers ex-

plained that the Muslim youths' inadequate knowledge of Arabic language and their limited appreciation of the religion of Islam made them adopt manners that are foreign to Islam. They refer to the frequent use of non-Muslim saluting and greeting expressions and like "hi", "bye-bye", "see you", or "good luck" by these Muslims when greeting their Muslim friends instead of using conventional Islamic expressions. Concerning the translation of the Islamic creeds and religious terminologies like "salaah" and "zakaah", the respondents either stuck to the common distorted transliterations like "prayer" and "charity" or could not translate them appropriately to "convey the full meaning of the terminology" (p. 446). Accordingly, they concluded that "Americano-Eurocentric perspective of the teaching of the English Language has a negative effect on Muslim youths living in the Muslim world" (p. 448). They suggested that Muslim educators and Muslim linguists should work on developing "Islamic English corpora" which could be utilized by materials developers and textbook writers.

Nonetheless, the whole story of Islamic English does not sound very far-fetched at present time. Mahboob (2009), a Pakistani researcher, brings examples from English language textbooks published for use in public and private Pakistani schools in which Arabic and other Islamic markers like *Mashaa-Allah* and *Alhamdulillah* are inserted within the English texts to show "the iconic power of this text and its relationship to Islamic values and systems" and "with the function of indexing and projecting an Islamic identity" (p. 11). Remarkably, Othman and Lotfie (2013) in their pursuit of Malaysian students' perspective on incorporation of Arabic words in the English language usage of Muslim learners reported on the respondents' desire for inclusion of Islamic Arabic vocabulary in the teaching of English to Muslim learners. They expressed several reasons for this issue, including inaccuracy of translated Islamic concepts and definitions in dictionaries, inadequacy of a number of translated terms in conveying meanings intended by Muslim learners of English language, the possible cultural effects of western definitions of Islamic words, and the necessity of enhancement of Islamic knowledge.

One step further, there have been endeavors for Islamizing English education by bringing certain changes to the curriculum; given the incongruence between the aims of Muslim education and the objectives of teaching English. For instance, Adebayo (2005) reported on the attempts made in establishing Muslim nursery schools in Nigeria where mathematical skills, English language, social habits (like proper greetings, dressing habits, respect for others), and scientific and reflective thinking (like planting of seeds and watching and observing their growth) are taught based on Islamic epistemology and terminology. Showing objections to the current growth of secular nursery education in the contemporary Nigeria, Adebayo argued that "The force of homogenization, hegemonization and Europeanization in the name of globalization has eroded not only the Islamic culture from the innocent minds of the young pupils, but also their natural language" (2005, p.7). In describing such Muslim schools, he referred to steps taken in teaching English language alphabets not based on the "conventional secular 'A for Apple, B for Ball' method", but via substituting them with teaching "Allah's attributes through an English alphabetical rhyme"

(p. 14), like A for Allah, B for Beneficent, C for Compassionate, or D for Dominant.

Mohd-Asraf (2012), a post-colonial Indonesian writer, also elaborated on the way English coursebooks could contain Islamic messages and themes so that the cultures embedded in them might not be in conflict with the values and cultures held by the Muslim learners of English. He suggested explicit mentioning of the Islamic topics and expressions in English such as the ways of doing religious rituals like “wudhu” or “Muslims’ habits of preparing a special appetizer during the fasting month of Ramadan” (p. 161). Other strategies were indirect mentioning of Islamic themes through pictures, inclusion of Muslim names or Muslims’ daily language activities, and benefiting from the available authentic materials, such as newspapers with Islamic messages or Islamic songs. As an example, he made a mention of a song, “We love Muhammad” (peace be upon him), through which students can focus on lexical sets and grammar points while listening to the song and then speaking about the Prophet.

In a similar vein, we can also see an ongoing movement on the part of materials developers for inclusion of Islamic markers in English textbooks designed for Muslim learners around the globe. Examples are *I Can Series* (set of five books) by Ghani and Ibrahim (2005) introducing and illustrating some basic Islamic concepts and manners to young Muslim children and answering children queries about Islam as faith like making du’a, reading the Qur’an, or praying to Allah; *The Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns: A Muslim Book of Colors* by Khan (2012) teaching English colors via elements of Islamic culture like “Golden dome of the mosque” or “brown date in Ramadan”; *The Best Eid Ever* by Mobin-Uddin (2007) narrating the story of a Muslim family celebrating an Eid related to Hajj pilgrimage; *Under the Ramadan Moon* by Whitman (2011) introducing the month of Ramadan to young readers and the particular rituals performed by Muslims during this month; and *Secrets of the Turtle* by Ghahremani Ghajar (2009) in which a turtle is depicted travelling to different places like the holy city of Mecca and sharing its own stories with other people (just to mention a few). Adding to the list there are also some Islamic smartphone apps and games.

Despite the reported cases, practical cases of Islamic English materials and teaching practices are still infrequent, less known, or have not taken hold in a widespread manner. Hudson (2011), an English teacher in Arabic countries, states that rather than working for Islamic models of English, what actually could be seen in much of the Muslim world is censoring teaching materials and removing potentially controversial or un-Islamic subjects, words and phrases. Though a quick purging, bulldozing or “naïve dismissal of every topic or theme which is from a non-Islamic source or deemed to be controversial” (Ismail Ahmad Shah, et al., 2012, p. 190) is not recommended, the necessity of preparing creative and ingenious Islamic ELT materials is quite palpable, given the growing number of Muslim English learners around the globe and in Iran.

Significantly enough, in a very sensitive era in which Islam as a faith is misapprehended, xenophobia and Islamophobia are cunningly spearheaded by the global mass media, and Muslims are biasedly imaged as nefarious terrorists and blood-thirsty fundamentalists with propensity for violence, cultivating a generation of Muslim intellectuals who can both propagate true Islamic values and spirits (Karmani, 2005c; Mirhosseini & Rouzbeh, 2015) and “become insiders and use the language in their own terms according to their own aspirations, needs, and values ... not as slaves, but as agents ... creatively and critically” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 176) is highly demanded.

The Current Adventure

As a Muslim-Iranian English language teacher, the disparity between the type of knowledge projected, transmitted, and produced in English language classrooms and the insight imparted in Islamic sources has long caused my bewilderment. This time what instigated a planned action was a formal request from the executive manager of a Qur’anic Cultural Centre, located in one of the suburbs of Alborz province. As part of its programs, the institute offered English courses to language learners ranging from seven to fifteen in age. Despite having used the imported materials for long, the manager expressed her explicit dissatisfaction with the ways in which the learners are being typically taught through the common English products which to her lacked the sufficient cultural and religious relevance and meaningful connection to the lives of Iranian-Muslim language learners. She desired that appropriate materials, either as primary sources or supplementary ones, would be designed and developed through which Islamic concepts would be taught through the medium of English. In order to have a more profound understanding of the learning needs of the target group of the learners and the attitudes of the students and their families towards inclusion of classroom materials with Islamic themes, I had talks with a number of parents and language teachers. Although they held varied viewpoints, the majority of them agreed on the necessity of an alternative education featuring Islamic moral values; however, they were emphatic that it should be done in an entertaining way. As explained by Richards (2001), when the learners may not have “immediate perception of their needs”, curriculum planners can consult parents, teachers, stakeholders, and other persons with a right to comment on the curriculum process to “find out what knowledge of English they expect...students to achieve” (p. 53). Accordingly, the gained information served the basis for further actions in this project.

Though the topics abound, an issue which impressively caught my attention was how in Islamic sources –most notably the Sublime Qur’an and narrations– the body parts, their statuses, the reasons for their creation, and their functioning have been pictured. The creation and evolution of physical organs– accompanied with intricate and sophisticated processes, is seen as one of the signs of Allah, the Almighty, which should give us a point of departure for reflection, contemplation, and action. The Qur’anic verses below refer to a number of

senses endowed blessedly to human beings by Allah and the necessity of showing appreciation and grateful thanks:

- It is He Who has created hearing, sight and minds for you. What little thanks you show! (The Sublime Qur'an, 23:78).
- Allah brought you out of your mothers' wombs knowing nothing at all, and gave you hearing, sight and minds so that perhaps you would show thanks (The Sublime Qur'an, 16:78).
- Say: "What do you think? If Allah took away your hearing and your sight and sealed up your hearts, what god is there, other than Allah, who could give them back to you?" (The Sublime Qur'an, 6:46).

Notably, being highly connected with human soul and spiritual life, the way the body parts act, and what they behold and harbor are seen to determine each individual's destiny. The Creator commands human beings to employ their physical organs in obeying Him by performing good deeds and refraining from the evil ones. Accordingly, in describing the Day of Judgment, Allah in the Sublime Qur'an refers to the status of body parts and how they would be resurrected to speak and bear witness to individuals' actions:

- That day shall We set a seal upon their mouths but their hands will speak to Us, and their feet bear witness to all that they did (The Sublime Qur'an, 36:65).
- ... Surely the hearing and the sight and the heart, all of these, shall be questioned about that (The Sublime Qur'an, 17:36).

Another source of Islamic teaching which insightfully elaborates on the status of the body parts is *Treatise on Rights* attributed to Imam Ali ibn al-Hussein—also known as Imam Sajjad (A)—the fourth Immaculate Imam of Shia. In this book, Imam elaborates on various types of duties, obligations, or responsibilities—known as rights or *Huquq*—incumbent upon human beings that they ought to observe in their relationship with Allah and his creatures. These include rights of Allah, the Almighty, rights of one's self (*nafs*), rights of salat, zakat, and pilgrimage, rights toward leaders, subjects, or relations of kin (like father, mother, children, siblings, etc.). Among other rights, the holy Imam elaborates on the rights of the various organs of the body like tongue, hearing, sight, hand, leg, stomach, and private part as organs through which manners are conducted.

Drawing inspiration from such divine perspectives towards body parts, and with a true desire to swim against the mainstream tide, I wondered how such views could possibly replace the current approach to teaching the body parts to young (non-)Iranian-Muslim EFL learners at pre/intermediate levels of English language proficiency. To the best of my knowledge, no such works has regrettably been done within the Iranian context of English language teaching.

Seeing nursery rhymes, short poems or songs for children, as one of the most enthralling and rich resources that can be used in teaching young lan-

guage learners, I set heart on composing poetic verses aimed at introducing body parts through such divine perspectives. What heartened me was a fairly large bulk of theoretical and research-based literature acknowledging the pedagogical implications of nursery rhymes as natural literacy development sources; particularly for young language learners who are at the beginning stages of language learning. In a blustering defense, Sedgwick (1997, p. 9) states that “the best way of teaching language and thereby helping children to gain power over their world is to teach poetry”.

As noted, the musical composition of this sort of poetry, enjoying a strong sense of rhyme and rhythm, makes it easy and delightful to read out, recite, dramatize or act out. Besides creating pleasant learning atmospheres, the repetitive language of nursery rhyme provides ample opportunities for learners to get acquainted with and practice sound patterns, words’ stress, pronunciation, prosodic features like pitch, tempo or intonation variations, and connected speech (Bland, 2013; Prosic-Santovac, 2015; Vásquez, Hansen, & Smith, 2010). Another bonus feature is that vocabulary and grammatical structures are presented in meaningful situational contexts like playful interactions, conversations, and dialogues (Pourkalhor & Tavakoli, 2017). From a cultural viewpoint, nursery rhymes are seen to “reflect the ideas and attitudes of societies and individuals that created” them (Prosic-Santovac, 2007, p. 427), and can hence indiscernibly imprint certain meanings and values onto the young learners’ minds!

It was against this backdrop that I dared to venture composing nursery rhymes; an undertaking which appeared to be formidable and intimidating yet pleasing and promising. It commenced with consulting the related sources including, *inter alia*, the Sublime Qur’an, exegeses, Arabic, Persian, and English versions of Imam Sajjad’s *The Treatise on Rights*, Persian and English commentaries on the book like Imam Sajjad’s *Treaties on Rights* by Heidari Naraq (2014), and *A Divine Perspective on Rights* translated into English by Peiravi and Morgan (2002), Internet sources, and a Persian book, *School of Imam Sajad (A)* by Vahidi Sadr and Heidari (2013), containing nursery rhymes and illustrations for introducing Imam Sajjad’s *The Treatise of Rights* to young Iranian kids. This was accompanied with taking notes on concepts that could possibly be included in the verses.

On another channel of inquiry, I engaged in collecting and reading sample nursery rhymes to get a sense of literary devices like rhymes, repetitions, and alliterations. With that in mind, I also surveyed the popular English textbooks to see how the issue of body organs has been presented. I could see that following a fairly conventional and routine approach, body organs are chiefly presented to young language learners through nursery rhymes, short poems or action songs in which vocabulary for parts of the body (like head, finger, mouth, nose, eye and ears...) plus a series of actions or movements related to them are presented. Ensuing the technics used in the Total Physical Response (TPR) method of language teaching—which theorizes that physical movements can improve language acquisition by creating mind-body associations—language learners are often encouraged to move each body part as they say the body-

related vocabulary. Below are excerpts from two widely-used Oxford-published English language textbooks:

What Are You Doing?
What are you doing?
I'm playing a game
Watch what I do,
And do the same.
Clap your hands
Count to three,
Wiggle your toes,
Smile at me.
Nod your head
Bend your knees...
(Let's Go 2, Student Book, 2012, p. 67)

If you want to keep fit, here is what you have to do.
You have to do sports and exercise too.
But wait! Don't forget to warm up first
Without warming up, your muscles can get hurt... .
Lift your arms up and stretch your fingers out.
Keep your shoulders down and wiggle them about
Now twist your wrists around and around
Bend your elbows in and look at the ground
(Happy World 2, Student Book, 2014, p. 48).

As the excerpts might reveal, in this approach, following a fairly common ideology, physical organs of the body are seen as units of life neutrally responsible for performing a series of actions and movements; an orientation which might be suggestive of a humanistic and materialistic world view devoid of any spiritual outlook; and it was this divine chasm I wished to be bridged.

For weeks, I channeled this into a daily practice of thinking, writing, drafting, editing, and proofreading repeatedly. To me, one of the challenges was finding the right homophonic words which could well rhyme together with right syllabic structure. As the targeted young learners are at the initial levels of language learning and enjoy limited knowledge of English, I had to make decisions about strings of words and phrases which are catchy and delightful to read and remember, simple in terms of grammatical items yet meaningful. The meaningfulness element daunted me from throwing ideas into verse lines because they simply added a fun element.

Meanwhile, I was in contact with a religious advisor who has a good command of Islamic teachings to inspect the poems for possible misinterpretations in terms of divine perspectives. Concurrently, upon preparing the first drafts, I asked one of the ELT professors in our faculty to comment on the poems. Besides a vast knowledge and practical experiences in language teaching, she enjoyed an artistic spirit and expertise in designing materials. Like a critical friend, she offered suggestions on how the poems could be improved by re-

placement of certain words or structures. With revisions made, I asked three English language teachers who had the experience of working with young language learners to assess the work and even practice some excerpts with their learners. This informal piloting of the nursery rhymes aided me to refine them with a view of the target audience in mind. Nonetheless, further rigorous evaluation of the designed materials is about to be done upon their implementation in a real context of learning via considering teachers' and learners' perceptions of the content appeal of the materials, the short-term and long-term learning values of the materials, the extent to which such materials engage learners emotionally and cognitively, and their credibility and relevance to Muslim-Iranian learners' lives, needs, and wants (Tomlinson, 2013; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018).

In the coming section, I try to display how the ideas taken from Islamic sources paved the way for the composition of the nursery. Though the final composition is still in the process of being refined and appropriated, I hope that if such attempts are taken up seriously by other artistic, creative children writers and with the collaboration of experts from other fields, in the long run, such works may replace conventional, often pointless nursery rhymes like "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star", "Baa, baa black sheep", "Mary Had a Little Lamb", "Humpty Dumpty", and the like which are widely rehearsed and memorized by our language learners, often mindlessly.

Things that grow day by day Are all His signs to observe!

The poem starts with eye faculty and the sense of sight. The physical structure of eyes, eyelids and eyelashes like their anatomy and amazing vision system and millions of cells and muscles located there is so complex and mysterious that Allah has drawn our attention to its unique importance in the Sublime Qur'an by inquiring:

- Have We not made for him a pair of eyes? (The Sublime Qur'an, 90:8).

According to the Islamic sources, eyes are windows to the world for seeing, pondering over, and appreciating the countless signs and blessings of Allah (Heidari Naraq, 2014). Interestingly, the issue of "blindness" or being "in the realm of darkness" has been depicted insightfully in the Sublime Qur'an as the Allah the Almighty says:

- And the example of the disbelievers is similar to one who calls upon one that hears nothing except screaming and yelling; deaf, dumb, blind—so they do not have sense (The Sublime Qur'an, 2:171).
- And those who deny Our signs are deaf and dumb in realms of darkness... (The Sublime Qur'an, 6:39).

Accordingly, He warns that:

- And whoever is blind in this, he shall (also) be blind in the hereafter (The Sublime Qur'an, 17:72).

In the Treaties of Rights, the fourth Imam introduces eyes as “gateway to reflection” as well as tools for learning, taking lessons, and gaining knowledge and insight. He adds that “The right of sight is that you lower it before everything which is unlawful to you. And that you abandon using it except in situations in which you can take heed in such a way that you gain insight or acquire knowledge by it”¹.

Taking these into consideration, the nursery rhyme preludes with making a mention of the role of eyes in seeing signs of Allah including “Night and day”, “Rain that falls and wind that breaks”, “Red roses on the earth”, and “Mom that loves and dad that cares”. It then encourages young readers to “use our eyes for His sake” and “close our eyes to what He hates”. Below are some lines:

Night and day
 Sun in the sky everyday
 Rain that falls and wind that breaks
 Are all His signs to observe!
 Things that grow day by day
 Red roses on the earth
 Apple, orange and sweet pears
 Don't forget vegetables
 Are all His signs to observe!
 Mom that loves and dad that cares
 Friends we can count on them
 Are all His signs to observe!

We can hear what is there! What if we could not hear??

Like eyes, ears and the faculty of hearing, besides their complicated anatomical structures consisting of delicate nerves, cells, bones, and sections like external auditory tube, middle ear, and eardrum, wondrously functioned to transmit aural information to brain and make the act of hearing sounds from different directions possible, have been construed in Islamic references as a great blessing endowed to human beings for which they are responsible. Ears and what they lend themselves to are seen to play a determining role in the prosperity or misery of human beings in the hereafter (Heidari Naraq, 2014) as Allah, the Almighty in describing the wrongdoers states:

- They will then say: “if only we had listened and reasoned, we should not now be among the inhabitants of the hell” (the Sublime Qur'an, 67: 10).

¹ Translated by Peiravi & Morgan (2002, p. 82)

Given its nobility, humans, believers in particular, are admonished not to lend their ears to evil words, namely, rumors, slanders, and backbiting. Similarly, Imam Sajjad in the Treaties on Rights delineates the rights of hearing among which is keeping it “pure from listening to backbiting (ghiba) and listening to that to which it is unlawful to listen¹”.

Taking these issues into consideration, the poetic episode starts with numerating a number of common sounds we can hear in our daily life, like the various sounds of birds and animals, tools, as well as the human voices including family members and friends. To highlight the hearing faculty, each stanza ends with the lines “We can hear what is there!! What if I could not hear?? Thank you Allah for ears”. Here is one stanza:

Birds’ singing above there
 Cats’ meowing below there
 Dogs’ barking over there
 Sheep’ bleating far away
 Cows’ mowing so near
 We can hear what is there!
 What if we could not hear??
 Thank you Allah for ears!

The part then ends with a moral part inviting readers to observe the rights of hearing by not listening to “what He hates” and closing ears “to those fakes”:

We care about what He hates
 Close ears to those fakes!
 Mocking, laughing at others!
 How awful are slanders!
 Making our hearts far away
 Filling ears with nonsense!

Watch what we say is not wrong! And keep it from lies and harms!

Another body organ characterized by its unique features is the tongue. Besides a muscular organ in the oral cavity responsible for taste, gustation, and mastication, it is the faculty of speaking which is known as a distinctive feature endowed on human beings (Heidari Naraq, 2014). As Allah, the Almighty explicitly states speech or the power of expressing inner thoughts, intentions, and covert feelings is the quality graciously imparted to the man:

- Have We not made for him two eyes? And a tongue and two lips? (The Sublime Qur’an, 90:8-9).
- He has created man. He has taught him speech (The Sublime Qur’an, 55:3-4).

¹ Translated by Peiravi and Morgan (2002, p. 77)

Not disregarding the wide range of duties performed by the tongue in socialization, speaking faculty is seen to be closely reflective of individuals' character and personality as well as reasoning and intellect. Given that, we are highly recommended to be diligent of what we say and not take lightly the words that come out of our mouths as they are recorded by divine "sentinels". Repeatedly in the Sublime Qur'an, believers are warned to preserve their tongue from telling lies, slander, mocking, spreading rumors and scandals, bragging, backbiting, false testifying, using bad mouth or obscene language, unnecessary talk, flattery, and finding faults and defects in others (just to mention a few). As Allah, the Almighty also enjoins:

- "O you who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others; it may be that the (latter) are better than the (former)... . Nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames... And spy not on each other behind their backs. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother?... (The Sublime Qur'an, 49:11-12).

Imam Sajjad (A) in describing the rights of tongue explains that "The right of the tongue is that you consider it too noble for obscenity, accustom it to good, direct it to politeness...refrain from any meddling in which there is nothing to be gained, express kindness to the people, and speak well concerning them"¹.

In an attempt to partially reflect such sophisticated ideas, the poetic episode starts with some lines mentioning the abilities performed by "little tongue inside" like "tasting foods hot and light", "sweet cherry, sour lime", "juicy grapes, fresh & dried". It then refers to a number of rights we should consider about the speech faculty. Here is an expert:

Let's be thankful of our tongue,
 Speak kind and be polite
 Watch what we say is not wrong
 Keep it from lies and harm
 Words breaking others' heart
 In making fun or finding fault
 By which grudges would come up
 Time of anger we keep calm
 And stop bad words coming out...

We don't hasten to eat up Chew it calmly with no rush

In addition to the physiological features and complex mechanism of the stomach as the main digestive system which links mouth to intestines, its spiritual role has been of great importance in the Islamic sources. The closest thing attributed to stomach is the process of foods' preparation and attainment, their ingredients and compositions as well as their physical and psychological effects

¹ Translated by Peiravi and Morgan (2002, p.52).

on body, soul, and mind. By placing a special emphasis on foodstuffs, Allah, the Almighty in the Sublime Qur'an orders the man to assiduously "watch his food" and "eat of what is on earth, lawful and good". There are also numerous recommendations for food consumption like filling the stomach moderately and avoiding over eating, under-eating or malnutrition and more significantly consuming legitimate (Halal) food supplies and drinks and avoiding forbidden (Haram) meals (Heidari Naraq, 2014). Concerning the rights of stomach, Imam Sajjad advises us on how over/under eating can cause "indigestion, sluggishness, indolence, and it will hinder you from nobility and any good deeds"¹.

With these concepts, the nursery rhyme invites the young learners to think about healthy items for our life like "Milk, honey, apple pie", "Orange, grape, banana", "Rice, bread, cereal" as "Halal foods by Allah", and then refers to a number of etiquettes like saying "Bismillah" "Before taking the first bite" that we should observe while eating. Here are some lines:

Milk, honey, apple pie
 Orange, grape, banana
 Rice, bread, cereal
 Healthy items for our life
 Halal foods by Allah
 We don't forget "Bismillah"
 Before taking the first bite
 We don't hasten to eat up
 Chew it calmly with no rush
 Overeating is so wrong
 Making body weak and dull...

The other poetic episodes focus on hands and legs as two other body parts and explain a few of their rights as elaborated on the Islamic sources. Beyond superficial repetitions and memorization, the students could be encouraged to chant and sing while performing the actions, apply their personal creativity to add lines and compose verses, and make the language 'theirs'.

Doubtlessly, the final composition, containing over sixty lines, is still in need of modification, refinement and appropriation. However, I hope the example would be inspirational for other language teachers and materials developers interested in treading on a similar route.

Discussions and Concluding Comments

The increasing number of Muslim young learners, including Iranians, who are engaged in English language learning through Western patterns of thought, necessitates preparing creative and ingenious Islamic ELT materials by materials developers. Far from making any originality claim, in a modest endeavor, I set heart on designing materials (nursery rhymes) targeted at introducing body

¹ Translated by Peiravi and Morgan (2002, p.121).

organs and their divine rights to young English learner through deriving inspiration from Islamic references like the Sublime Qur'an and more particularly, Imam Sajjad's Treaties on Rights (*Risalat al-Huquq*). In designing the composed lyrics, attempts were made to introduce body organs as signs (*ayats*) of the Almighty Creator to not only promote learning of the language but propagate spiritual values, beliefs, ethics and courtesy which make us more cognizant of our duties and more appreciative of Allah's bounties.

To further strengthen the movement, textbook writers and materials developers illustrators, musicians, and language experts along with other professionals in Muslim countries should seriously get down on loosening the ties of chronic dependency on Western imported products or emulating them by designing and developing educational materials which are not only appropriate to the mentality and level of development of various groups of learners, but also the ones which can keep abreast of the changing climates of the modern time. As Karmani (2005c) rightfully cries, "It's as if the entire Muslim world with a population of almost one and a half billion people and its numerous countries, societies, traditions, histories, and languages has virtually nothing to say about second-language education" (p. 743).

Moreover, like any other agenda, the crucial role of language teachers cannot be ignored in the success or failure of implementing such curricula. We language teachers who desire to use such kinds of materials need to initially enter a state of readiness or we are likely not able to tune into the aura. If we do not have a clear understanding of the vision and mission ahead and faith in the purpose, wholeheartedly, then we are likely to fight a losing battle from the outset. In other words, for changes to happen, we should hold genuine passion for turning language learning into meaningful and spiritually-driven learning experiences for ourselves and learners, and attempt for creating events that engage their hearts, minds, and tongues rather than a tendency to stick to the routines.

As another prerequisite, teacher education programs aimed at propagating Islamic perspectives on education in general and language education in particular should be planned and structured methodically (Memon, 2011). As Ismail Ahmad Shah, et al. (2012, p. 195) suggest:

To effectively teach English from an Islamic perspective, the Muslim educator must not only be grounded in current understanding and methodology of teaching English, but must also have strong faith and familiarity with the higher purpose of the Islamic curriculum and the principles underlying the Islamization of Knowledge (IOK), and must be willing to dedicate his/her efforts to achieving the Islamic goals and objectives of the institution of learning.

It is in this spirit that we can start carving out identity and ownership in foreign language teaching. May the enthusiasm would never waver!

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