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Identity, religion and new definition of inclusiveness in Iranian high school EFL textbooks

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the link between religion and EFL textbooks in Iran. The goal of the researchers for carrying out this study is to show the interrelatedness of religion and education in EFL settings. To gain the afore-mentioned goal, there were two phases. In the first phase, a series of Iranian EFL high school textbooks, published under the direct authority of the Iranian Ministry of Education, were analysed (in the form of linear and non-linear) to find out religious notions. The second phase involved the analysis of content in terms of inclusiveness of religion and culture. Another important notion was the analysis of the content of these textbooks to see whether the promotion of religion was hidden or not. Finally, identity and the concept of nationhood were discussed regarding religious content in EFL high school textbooks of Iran.

Keywords: Religion; ESL/EFL textbooks; Identity; Inclusiveness; Islam; Education

1. Introduction

Identity is a "socially constructed self that people continually co-construct and reconstruct in their interactions" (Partridge, 2006, p.38). There are a number of crucial elements in the process of constructing one's identity e.g., a shared set of values and beliefs, religion, an agreed upon cultural understanding and ideologies (Paltridge, 2006). The main aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between religion and education in Iranian EFL textbooks. Religion is a set of shared beliefs and values which carry certain ideological orientations (Wodak, 2011). Religion is mainly introduced to the students by educational and academic settings like schools, institutes and universities. In order to achieve the above goal, curriculum designers do their best in providing the textbooks with religious

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issues. As Rodriguez (2011, p.1) stated "We must look at the ways in which religion can benefit our educational system and textbooks, not harm them."

Having reviewed the related literature on education and religion, it was found that the topic has not been sufficiently touched by many professionals in ELT to date i.e., (Canagarajah, 2004 & 2005; Cheng &Beigi, 2012; Edge, 1996 & 2003; Kubota, 2009 & 2011; Kubota & Lin, 2009 and Wong &Canagarajah, 2009). In other words, the above mentioned research studies were mostly related to Christianity and other religions were not examined. In order to fill the mentioned gap, this paper aims to increase the awareness among teachers and students in Iranian settings, in addition to EFL/ESL community members. In this study, we set out to meticulously analyse the inclusiveness of English as Foreign Language textbooks. The corpus of the present study includes a number of Iranian EFL textbooks which are controlled by the Iranian Ministry of Education in terms of content and illustration.

In the first stage of the study, the mentioned EFL textbooks were scanned by the researchers to see if their writers included religious values / beliefs or concepts in linear and/or non-linear content of those textbooks. Kress (2003, p.21) believes that "linear content refers to the narrative text of EFL/ESL textbooks and non-linear content refers to the non-textual representation, i.e., pictures, illustrations". The next stage in the study is content analysis of the textbooks to find out the level of inclusiveness of the textbooks. Additionally, the religious contents were analysed in order to see whether the reproduction of religious content was overt or covert. It is important to note that the religious and cultural values of Iran were considered in this study by the researchers. In other words, factors such as men or women's dress codes and garments were also discussed. Lastly, the effect of religious content on an Iranian identity is delineated.

2. Iran, as the context of the study

To comprehend the concepts of education and religion in Iran, it is necessary to have some information about Iran and its demographic profile i.e., socio-political aspects, cultural values. Iran is a country located in Asia. It is a Middle Eastern country south of the Caspian Sea and north of the Persian Gulf. It shares borders with Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Armenia and Pakistan. The land area is 1,648,173 km and the population is 77,891,220 as estimated in July 2011 (World Factbook, 2011).

The official religion in Iran is Islam and the majority of people are Muslims (98 %) (World Factbook, 2011), however, there are two main groups within the community of Muslims in Iran, that is, Shi'ite Muslims (96%) and Sunni Muslims (2%) (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006). As mentioned, the official religion in Iran is Islam and due to the large amount of Shi'ite Muslims, Shi'ite Islam can be considered as the official religion (Ansari, 2002; World Factbook, 2011). The split between these two groups of Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims dates back to the time of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh), the leader of Islam or as Higgins (2006, p.38) states, "the split between Sunni and Shi'ite came very early in Islamic history". During his lifetime, Muhammad was the leader of the Muslim community, but with his death in 632 A.D the debate on the successor of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was started. The Shi'ite believed that Ali Ibn Abu Talib, the cousin and son in law of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is the right caliph and could succeed him, as Shi'ia Muslims hold that it was delineated in the GhadirKhumm (A place near the Holy city of Mecca) in 631AD (a year before Prophet Muhammad's death in the Haj -which is an annual spiritual pilgrimage to Mecca for all Muslims-) by Prophet Muhammad (Hussain, 1982). However, the Sunni (or followers of the Sunna – 'tradition', 'path' – of Muhammad) believed that a close follower of the Prophet would be the most suitable choice and Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman are the right caliphs and Ali Ibn Abu Talib is the fourth caliph (Buckles and Toropov, 2004 ; Higgins, 2006).