Education and religion in Iran: The inclusiveness of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) textbooks

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A R T I C L E  I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

The focus of this paper is religion and education with particular reference to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) textbooks. The writers of this paper aim to raise the awareness of research community, educators, and teachers regarding the interconnectedness of religion and education. In the first phase of the study, the researchers scanned a series of secondary-level Iranian EFL textbooks prescribed by the Iranian Ministry of Education to determine religious concepts in the form of linear and/or non-linear content. The next phase of research was the analysis of the content to determine the level of inclusiveness of the textbooks in terms of culture and religion. These textbooks were also analyzed to determine whether the propagation of religious content was overt or covert. Finally, the impact of religious content in textbooks was discussed with reference to identity and nation building.

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1. Introduction

Individuals construct their identities based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, culture and religion. The focus of this paper is religion and education with particular reference to EFL textbooks. Religion is not only a set of beliefs, but also a tool for ideological propagation. Educational institutes such as schools or universities play an important role in providing students with a framework or a point of reference for understanding religion. This pedagogy is guided by a curriculum structured through textbooks.

To date, there has been little research in the domain of education and religion in Iran. The writers of this paper aim to fill the gap in this area with the aim of raising the awareness among the research community at large and the teachers and students who are the key stakeholders in the process of teaching and learning at a micro level. In this research, we set out to study and analyze the inclusiveness of English as a Foreign Language textbooks. The choice of EFL textbooks as the corpus of the present study is intentional as they are controlled by the Iranian Ministry of Education and Iranian writers are commissioned to produce them.

In the first phase of the study, the researchers scanned EFL textbooks prescribed by the Ministry to determine if their authors included religious concepts in linear and/or non-linear content of the textbooks. Linear content refers to the narrative text of these materials and non-linear content refers to the non-textual representations, in the form of illustrations. The next phase in this study is content analysis to determine the level of inclusiveness of the textbooks. This is followed by next level of analysis, the determination of whether the propagation of religious content was overt or covert. The researchers contextualized the study in the original socio-cultural environment; hence, the analysis is mindful of the religious and cultural backdrop against which the research is set. Important cultural factors as the blend of religion and culture such as dress code and social codes to which men and women adhere, are also discussed. Finally, the impact of religious content is discussed with reference to issues of identity and nation building.

2. Background of Iran as a nation

To understand the issues of religion and education in Iran, the reader has to be privy to the social-cultural and political landscape of Iran. Iran is located in Asia and occupies 636,363 square miles (1,648,173 km²) of the Middle East region. It is bordered by a number of countries including, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Persian Gulf (Francoeur, 2004). “Iran has a population of over 68 million which makes this country the sixteenth largest country in terms of population” (Daniel and Mahdhi, 2006, p. 4).

At a glance, Iran may pass as a nation that is homogeneous where the majority of the people are Muslims. 99% of the population are Muslims, however there are two very distinct groups, that is, Sunni Muslims (3%) and Shi’ite Muslims (96%) (Daniel and Mahdhi, 2006). As Shi’ite Muslims form the majority group, it is therefore Shi’ite Islam that is listed as the official religion of Iran (Daniel and Mahdhi, 2006; Francoeur, 2004; Ansari, 2002). One therefore finds that although Islam is the dominant
faith in Iran, there are nevertheless two factions: Sunni and Shi’ite. The Shiites comprise 96% of Iranian population and follow ‘Ali’, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, as the proper successor of Islam founder. Sunni Muslims regard Ali as the fourth ‘caliph’ (successor to Mohammed (pbuh) as leader of the Muslims) following on from Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman (Buckles and Toropov, 2004; Francoeur, 2004). Sunni Islam is mainly practised among ethnic minorities such as ethnic Kurds and Belouch (Denny, 1987; Noss and Noss, 1990).

Iran has diverse ethnic groups living in different parts of this country including, Azerbaijani, Kur, Baluch, Ghashghai and Turkoman (Daniel and Mahdi, 2006; O’Shea, 2000a,b). These Iranian ethnic groups have different types of cultures, traditions, and dress codes for men and women (Daniel and Mahdi, 2006; Francoeur, 2004). Apart from Islam, other religious minorities, including Christians, Jews, Baha’is, Zoroastrians, Isma’ilis, Sikhs, and Buddhists live in isolated communities in Iran (Francoeur, 2004). Of these religions, the Iranian government only recognizes Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity as non-Muslim minority groups (Paivandi, 2008).

3. Effects of the Islamic revolution 1979

A revolution known as the Islamic revolution of Iran occurred in 1979 when the Islamic government of Iran overthrew the Shah of Iran. This brought the dawn of a new era in Iran in which the new Islamic republic began to Islamize many sectors in Iran which had secular foundations prior to the revolution (Richter, 2005). As reported by Paivandi (2008, p. 7), “following the 1979 Revolution, the newly-installed Islamic power quickly pursued its main objective of establishing an Islamist state by reforming major institutions such as the judicial and educational systems”. The Islamic revolution hence had far reaching implications in the inclusiveness of legislation and policies, given the fact that Iran is a multietnic and multicultural nation.

Iranian culture is an amalgam of ancient Persian traditions, Islamic ideology, and western culture (Bani-Asadi, 1984, as cited in Budhwar and Debrah, 2004). Iran is a nation with multiple ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious minorities and its culture is influenced not only by this multiplicity of ethnic groups but it is also greatly impacted by the three different sources mentioned above. After the 1979 Islamic revolution, there appears to be a homogenization of Iranian culture as the Islamic traditions and ideology are enforced by the Iranian authorities following the revolution (Daniel and Mahdi, 2006). These Islamic traditions originate from the Qur’an and “Hadith” (Cunningham and Reich, 2009). The term Hadith refers to anecdotes about Muhammad and other founders of Islam (Bunni, 2005).

Shi’ite and Sunni followers have different sets of Hadith collections (Banchard, 2006). The Shi’ite Hadith differs from Sunni Hadith, “mainly in that they include the sayings of the Shi’ite imams who are considered to have been divinely inspired” (Banchard, 2006, p. 14). Islamic laws called sharia, derive from the interpretations of both Qur’an and Hadith (Cunningham and Reich, 2009). In case of ambiguity in Qur’an and Hadith, a mujtahid, a high-ranking religious man, uses his own reasoning in addition to the Qur’an and Hadith to arrive at a decision (Paiidar, 1995). For example, there is nothing in the Qur’an and Hadith that requires a specific dress code for all women (Haque, 2006); therefore a mujtahid decides how women should be dressed based on his reasoning. Today the Hadith are so much more than anecdotes, and the Quran is much less prescriptive than the Christian Bible or the Confucian Analects; hence, mujtahids’ interpretations are decisive. The decisions made by mujtahids are called fatwa (Paiidar, 1995) and are usually made as state rules. These Islamic state rules are strictly performed by the Iranian authorities (Francoeur, 2004) because it is the aspiration of the Iranian government to Islamize the whole Iranian nation (Paivandi, 2008; Richter, 2005).

4. Religion and education

Education is an asset carefully guarded by a nations’ leader and its people since the future of a nation depends on the intellectual nurturing provided by educational institutions. In secular countries with no official state-sponsored religion, religious ideology may have the least effect on education. Conversely, in theocratic states, religion is a private issue with public implications; although individuals are said to have the right to practice their religion in any way chosen, religion is closely regulated by the laws of such countries. Hence, in contrast to the freedom of religion in secular countries, theocratic nations develop laws and legislation that reflect the official stand and ideology of such countries in both judicial matters and education.

Religion and education go hand in hand. Throughout the centuries, the use of education as a tool to indoctrinate has been documented. We have seen how the role of education in creating an ethical and moral society has led to the inclusion of religious values in both an overt and covert form in textbooks ranging from language to history. There appears then to be a tension between secular and theocratic states: the need to guard freedom of religion while on the other hand to use religion in education to indoctrinate.

When the prominent roles of non-Western countries, such as China, African countries, and Iran are considered in the political and economic arenas of today, one becomes acutely conscious of the importance of these countries. Iran, the focus of this current study, is a leading theocratic country in Asia and Africa. Thus, the supposed differences between this country and the West require analysis from several angles, particularly those of religion and education. Iran may embrace different perspectives on freedom and individual rights than secular states do, which can be linked to the notion that the country is theocratic. Investigating the interconnectedness of religion and education in Iran could shed light on how the Iranian government regards freedom and individual rights.

5. The education system in Iran

Following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the secular education system in Iran was replaced by an Islamic system. “The new Islamic Republic rapidly began to speak of the Islamization (islami kardan) of the educational system” (Paivandi, 2008, p. 5).

The first phase toward Islamization in the education system saw the removal of teachers who were opposed to Islamic views (Chelkowski and Dabashi, 2002). The move also saw the enforcement of the hijab and Islamic dress codes for female students at schools (Chelkowski and Dabashi, 2002). In the 1980s, the Islamic revolution led to a complete revision of the curriculum and textbooks in the Iranian education system. The contents of geography, history, literature, civics, social sciences, religion, and language textbooks were rewritten based on Islamic doctrine and the new social, political and economic status of Iran (Azimi, 2007).

Education is compulsory for 12 years in Iran and the school education system falls under the purview of the Ministry of Education and Training (Palls, 2010). The educational system is four-tiered starting with Dabestan (primary level of education) (grades 1–5), Rahanmai (secondary level of education) (grades 6–8), Dabirestan (high school level) (grades 9–11), and Pishdanshag (pre-university level) (grade 12). Formal schools in Iran begin at the age of seven (Palls, 2010). English as a formal school subject is introduced at Rahanmai (secondary level) of education and caters for the needs of students at this level who are aged between 11 and
13 years of age (Babaii and Ansary, 2003). Textbooks for each and every subject in schools are authorized by the Ministry of Education and Training (Babaii and Ansary, 2003).

Herein lies the tension mentioned earlier—secular and theocratic states have divergent viewpoints regarding the relationship between religion and society. No ruling power can remain completely neutral as there is always an interest; even the fear of reprimand for not taking a stand is a very real one. Theocratic countries are able to move religion from the sphere of the individual and the private to the public domain that expresses the ideology of the ruling powers. While a secular society does not sponsor any religious belief, a theocratic state may indoctrinate its citizens in its official religion. Besides other arenas, the difference between theocratic and secular countries is particularly evident in education. By analyzing the textbooks published under the supervision of the education ministries of theocratic states, one appreciates how human rights are viewed in the education system of such countries.

6. Social justice and equity in education from a western viewpoint

Equity means “giving values to, and celebrating social and cultural differences [and preferences] of individuals in society” (Penney, 2000, p. 6). In many secular societies, equity has been taken into consideration in social spheres. From Western viewpoints, the marginalization of ethnic minorities via the monocultural treatment of the Islamic religion in school EFL textbooks may be viewed as an instance of social inequity in Iran that transcends the realm of education. Nevertheless, “education is an activity which goes on in a society and its aims and methods depend on the nature of the society in which it takes place” (Ottaway and Cosway, 2001, p. 1). Thus, in Iran, where 98% of people are Muslims the existing inequality in the educational system could not be a reflection of social injustice in society at large. Rather, it emphasizes on the unity of such a nation. Bruner (1996, p. 15) explains that “effective education is always in jeopardy either in the culture at large or with constituencies more dedicated to maintaining a status quo than to fostering flexibility”. Political motivations play a pivotal role in perpetuating the status quo (Knudson, 2010). Disparate inequalities continue to be perpetuated because politics drives education to train an underclass to sustain the industry (Knudson, 2010). However, in the case of Iran with the high level of religious homogeneity, the notion of having a subordinate religious minority could not be justified. Education can shape a society because knowledge creates change (Fishman, 1998) and change in education in turn, brings equality and justice for all (Ottaway and Cosway, 2001). From a secular perspective, by perpetuating inequality via education, the Iranian government may be employing education as a tool to maintain power and hence the existing status quo. This may be because when cultural, ethnic, and religious diversities are highlighted in education, there will be a need for equity discussions, which may not suit the agenda of those who are presently in power. Nevertheless, because of the large population of Muslims in Iran and the importance of unity, the Iranian government sees greater significance in building a sense of nationhood among Iranians rather than highlighting religious and ethnic minorities. Iran’s enemies, including Western Imperi- alists, incessantly seek to wage a war against this strategic country. In sum, the religio-social, ethnic and political contexts are determining factors in the case of Iran. For instance, Muslims in Malaysia constitute just nearly a third of its population; in Iran the number of Muslim is 98%. While Buddhists and Christians form over 19% and 9% of population respectively in Malaysia, not more than 1% of Iranian population practices non-Islamic religions in Iran. Thus, Western concepts of equality and equity may not fit a theocratic country like Iran.

7. EFL textbooks and religion in Iran

In this study the choice of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks is deliberate. Good EFL textbooks offer learners a spectrum of learning, encompassing not only language but also culture. Celik and Turkan (2007) point out that an examination of EFL textbooks allows access to a large pool of source-language beliefs and values. This, therefore, serves as the target research point for the researchers. It is at this level of the educational system and at this point that Iranian students are first introduced to a foreign language. The cultural points related to the target language are surprising limited. No visible aspects of the culture of the English language speakers were represented in such textbooks. Only, vocabulary and grammatical point of the target language were introduced through an Iranian dominated context. Even non-Iranian names were not used for the depicted figures in such textbooks.

One may argue that students are not passive beings but rather are critical thinkers able to weed out ideology that goes against the grain of what they stand for and believe in. However, indoctrina- tion can be particularly influential with the less-experienced or younger learners who take the ideas presented to them in their textbooks as absolute fact (Trudel and Dreyer, 2009). Rosamond and Florence (2004) argue that the consequences of textbook choice have more significant impacts for younger learners, whose limited experience justifies not questioning what their textbooks contain and who generally tend to trust their textbooks more than adult learners do. In Iran, students begin their study of English as a mandatory school subject in their first year of secondary school. English is a foreign language in Iran; students have little opportunity to meet native English speakers outside school.

This study proves significant as the choice of textbooks is neither determined by the teacher nor the school. The choice is made by Iran’s Ministry of Education and Training that prescribes all textbooks, including EFL materials for public secondary schools. Given this scenario, the analysis of EFL textbooks as the purveyor of religious content is important. In Iran, the government is a key actor in preparing and controlling the school curricula, a student’s learning will become deeply affected by the content of textbooks (Paiwandii, 2008, p. 5). Among other textbooks, EFL textbooks are likely to act as the teacher, the resource, and the ideology in foreign language classrooms (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999). “Such textbooks are produced massively for English as a Foreign Language (EFL)… all over the world. EFL textbooks produced at a national level for particular countries mirror the students’ local cultures, rather than the English-speaking cultures” (Celik and Turkan, 2007, p. 20). In other words, EFL textbooks are widely held to be an important platform giving awareness to students regarding their own cultural identity (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999). However, the portrayal of this culture is not neutral but rather controlled by administra- tive powers as a tool to build the sense of nationhood.

8. Methodology

For purposes of the current study, three Iranian EFL textbooks entitled “Right Path to English I, II, and III” written by Iranian authors prescribed by Iran’s Ministry of Education for the secondary (Rhanmaj) level, were investigated using content analysis. Content analysis is a method for analyzing the content of any medium of communication, including books and TV programs. This approach utilizes quantitative and qualitative analyses to investigate possible direct and indirect messages. Quantitative analysis analyzes the existence of target words, images, and
messages whereas qualitative content analysis takes the underlying meanings into account (PROMISE, 2001).

Textbook illustrations were scanned to determine any reference to Islamic religious concepts and rituals in the pictures of these textbooks. In the case of ambiguity, two types of scanning were employed— a qualitative and quantitative scanning of the images (Esen, 2007). First, the number of images depicting Islamic religious concepts was tallied. Images portraying religious concepts were subsequently linked to the narrative text accompanying each image to determine if the textbook authors included religious concepts in these educational materials. Subsequently, the narrative text of these textbooks, including lexical items and sentences was analyzed to determine “linear religious content” in such textbooks. The number of images, lexical items and sentences depicting Islamic religious notions was tallied and the data were organized based on the themes revealed after a preliminary scanning of pictures, lexical items and sentences.

9. Illustrations in textbooks

It was pointed out in the first phase of the present study that textbooks were analyzed to determine if there was religious content in the narrative text (linear form) and the illustrations (non-linear form) of these educational materials. The researchers confirmed this to be the case. In this section, we report on non-linear religious content found in the textbooks. We have chosen to represent the analysis of the data according to major themes that emerged in the data, as categorized below.

9.1. Women’s apparel

In analyzing the data the researchers made a correlation between the total number of women depicted in non-linear forms depicted in the apparel they were wearing. The numbers of women wearing the Islamic hijab in Books I, II, and III were 234, 144, and 140, respectively. No women were observed wearing clothes other than the Islamic hijab in the analyzed textbook illustrations. Thus, the results showed that all women wore the hijab. Bigger (2006, p. 5) points out that sexual passions outside of marriage have to be avoided in the Islamic religion and the ‘greater burden falls on women as their whole body is assumed to be attractive to men and might attract unwanted sexual attention.’ It is thus a necessity for both males and females to be dressed modestly, that is, they have to cover their bodies in loose garments or in this case the hijab. A very important statement by Bigger (2006, p. 6) is that ‘dressing modestly from choice is different from being covered up at the insistence of a husband or family or legal system’. By depicting women dressed in hijab, EFL textbooks are covertly indoctrinating the fact that women must be covered. There was no instance of illustrations of women dressed in other forms of apparel in the three textbooks.

9.2. Men/women wearing revealing clothes

Bigger (2006, p. 5) reports that ‘both females and males need to be modest and dress modestly, to cover their bodies and even body shapes with loose garments’. In line with Bigger’s observation above, a scan of the non-linear illustrations pertaining to wearing of revealing apparel among both the male and female gender proved to be negative. Not only are women represented in Islamic clothes including long dresses and scarf, men were also represented in long-sleeved shirts. This can be to the fact that although men are not required to cover their heads, in Islam men should not reveal the bodies (Bullock, 2002). Hence, just as with the women, there was no instance of men wearing short-sleeve shirts or short pants.

9.3. Women wearing make-up

Likewise the scan showed none of the women depicted in the three textbooks were wearing make-up. This stems from the desire to avoid unwanted sexual attention from the opposite gender. In so doing, the female gender are obeying the Muslim law of being modest and not soliciting unwanted sexual passion from the male gender.

9.4. Physical proximity

A preliminary scan of textbook illustrations showed a number of cases of men and women holding hands and touching each other’s body parts. In Books I, II, and III, there were respectively four, three, and one male characters holding hands or touching each other. Nearly similar results emerged for women: three in Book I, three in Book II, and two in Book III. Finally, men and women were pictured holding hands and touching in all three books: three times in Book I, twice in Book II, and three times in Book III. A second level of scanning—qualitative scanning—was carried out, in which the picture was linked to the accompanying narrative text of each image. In the case of ambiguity, qualitative scanning can assist researchers to determine the intention of textbook writers with more precision (Esen, 2007). An analysis of illustrations with regard to the accompanying sentences revealed that the portrayals of men and women touching each other in all cases were related to mother–son or father–daughter dyads which are Mahram (acceptable) under Islamic laws (Haeri, 1989). In other words, there is no linear or non-linear presentation of a boyfriend/girlfriend dyad, as this is unacceptable by Islamic laws.

9.5. Men and women talking or walking with each other

The qualitative scanning of the pictures revealed that all instances of men and women talking/walking with each other related to the father/daughter dyad, mother/son dyad, or sibling relationships. This is, again, in line with Islamic laws where men and women who do not share family or blood relations are not allowed to socialize together without a chaperone present.

9.6. Men and women in traditional family roles

The pictures in the textbooks portray women performing household tasks. The numbers of men and women performing household tasks and taking care of children were 48 and 10, respectively. This situation may reinforce the traditional gender belief of men the bread winner/women at home. From a religious perspective, Islamic laws are in support of a patriarchal family. Thus, the depiction of women performing household tasks in the analyzed textbooks may be related to this religious law.

9.7. Women/men driving

Iran permits women to drive. This fact has been reflected in the equal numbers of male and female drivers in textbook illustrations. The number of male and female drivers in the illustrations was 10 cases of each.

9.8. Men and women sitting together in isolation

An analysis of the data shows that in the first two EFL books, books I and II, men and women dyads were not portrayed in isolation The portrayal of men and women in isolation can be linked to Islamic laws, in particular, the Khalwat law, where men and women who are not related by marriage or blood are not allowed to be in a place together without a chaperone (Abaza,
2002). It is only in Book III that the man–woman dyad is introduced and portrayed. However, an analysis of the non-linear pictures accompanying the text revealed that there were only three such occurrences of men and women portrayed together in isolation. Furthermore, it was revealed that these dyads had familial relation; for example characters depicted were brother and sister.

9.9. Men and women in heterosexual relationships

Similar to the findings on the lack of portrayals of male–female dyads in isolation, the portrayal of male–female dyads in heterosexual relationships were that of father and mother. No portrayals of boyfriend–girlfriend relationships were recorded, as premarital relationships are prohibited under Islamic laws (Anwar, 2004).

Additionally, there was no picture representing a homosexual relationship in the analyzed textbooks. This is not surprising as homosexuality is prohibited in Islam (Khosravi, 2009). As stated earlier, only intimate relationships which are linked to familial relationships, for example, father–mother, husband–wife and brother–sister are considered Mahram (acceptable).

10. Linear religious contents

In the second phase of the study, an analysis of the linear content was analyzed. The analysis took into consideration not only lexical items but also narrative texts and dialogues. The focus of the analysis was to determine if there were any references to Islamic religious concepts.

The researchers’ initial scan of the linear content showed that there was no explicit reference to ‘Islam’. However, a closer examination revealed that many lexical items, dialogues and narrative texts of these textbooks were found to be implicitly reinforcing religious notions. The researchers found lexical items that referred to Islamic concepts. The words ‘prayer’, holy shrine, and mosque respectively occurred in the language of the examined textbooks seven, two, and three times.

A preliminary scan of the narrative text revealed that although the words Islam and Muslims were not directly used in the content of the analyzed textbooks, the words prayer (Salat), Holy shrines (tombs of Shi’ite imams), and mosque (a place of worship for followers of Islam) were used, which indirectly refer to Islamic notions.

Meanwhile, a scan of dialogues reflected that the participants of dialogues featured were mostly from the same sex. Only in three instances were dialogues portrayed between male and female characters. A closer analysis however revealed that the male–female dyad depicted siblings. Additionally, the researchers noted the omission of the topic of alcohol consumption. Although this can be perceived an omission that is common as drinking is discouraged among students, this can also be attributed to the fact that alcoholic drinks are not allowed in Islam (Muyis, 2010).

In order to gain a better understanding of covert religious content in the Iranian EFL textbooks, the following excerpts from the textbooks are analyzed below:

10.1. Excerpt 1

(1) “My family and I went to Mashhad two years ago. . . We went to the holy shrine several times” (Book III, 46)

The excerpt refers to a religious ritual in Shi’ite Islam. Shi’ite Muslims usually visit the tombs of their imams. Mashhad is located in the north province of Iran and is the burial place of the eighth Shi’ite Imam. The holy shrine, that is, the tomb of the eighth Imam is considered a holy place by the Shi’ite Muslims. The excerpt above from Book III is therefore a covert reference to a Shi’ite ritual.

10.2. Excerpt 2

(2) “Tomorrow Hamid will get up . . . He will wash and pray” (Book III, 71).

In excerpt 2, the protagonist Hamid describes his daily activities. There is reference to prayer (Salat) being a part of Hamid’s daily activities. This can be seen as a form of implicit teaching of the need for good and religious Muslims to perform Salat every day.

The researchers also found non-linear depictions of both men and women performing Salat—that is, three instances in Books I and III, and four instances in Book II.

10.3. Excerpt 3

3) “Nahid: My mother was cooking dinner.
Mehri: What did you do?
Nahid: I washed the dirty dishes” (Book III, 43).

Excerpt 3 presents a patriarchal setting. It inculcates the ideology that it is the role of the female gender to take care of household chores. In this scene, it is the mother and daughter who are tasked with the chores of cooking and washing. The portrayal of women in traditional family roles in the dialogue is reflective of Islamic laws that support a patriarchal system not only in the running of a household but also in society as a whole. It should be noted that the Ancient Persian traditions also place an emphasis on a patriarchal system (Fast, 2010).

10.4. Excerpt 4

4) “Zahra: My father is a teacher. What about you?
Mehri: He is a doctor” (Book II, 62)

This dialogue could reinforce the patriarchal belief that men are as the family’s breadwinners. This idea can particularly be substantiated by the fact that during the scanning of the textbooks it was revealed that there were no lexical items or phrases that referred to the occupation of a mother outside the kitchen boundaries. Thus, this dialogue can refer to the patriarchal role of men in a traditional family

11. Conclusion

Iran is perceived as a homogeneous nation with 99% of the population being Muslims. However as pointed out by Daniel and Mahdi (2006), there are two very distinct groups the Sunni Muslims (3%) and the Shi’ite Muslims (96%). The researchers found a predominance of the Shi’ite religious and cultural practices in the ELF textbooks. However, the presentation of religion as a subject is covert. Islamic and religious groups have different cultures, traditions and dress codes for men and women (Daniel and Mahdi, 2006; Francoeur, 2004). From a Western perspective, the analyzed ELF textbooks failed to portray the cultures and religions of Iranian minority groups. However, the authors would suggest that the concept of Western inclusiveness may not be applicable in the context of Iranian theocracy. Given the high level of religious homogeneity in Iran,
what is of greater priority to the Iranian government is the building of a sense of nationhood to safeguard Iran against international threats and challenges. With its geopolitical position, Iran has been the target of constant threats from a large number of enemies, including Western Imperialists.

As mentioned earlier, the Iranian government recognizes Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity as non-Muslim religious minorities (Paivandi, 2008). The non-linear and linear analyses of the EFL textbooks show no evidence of inclusiveness for these religious minorities. In a secular country where equality and equity are defined differently, this feature is less desirable. However, in a theocratic country, like Iran, the lack of representation of other religious minorities could be construed as an effort of the Iranian government to develop unity among all Iranians, rather than as an attempt to disregard Iranian religious minorities. Since these textbooks are controlled by the Iranian Ministry of Education and Training – in other words, the ruling powers – one may question the lack of inclusiveness in the curriculum. Because of the socio-political and religious climate of Iran, Iranian EFL textbooks are representative of the majority but appears to exclude the minority. While the current status of such textbooks contrasts with the equality and equity desired in secular countries, the emphasis of the textbooks that were analyzed is to promote unity by highlighting the Islamic religion in education.

The findings of this research have shown that religion is not overtly depicted nor is it explicitly taught. At the same time, EFL textbooks do not expose students to the culture of the language that is being taught. Instead, Iranian foreign-language textbooks serve to reinforce the Islamic religion and cultural ideology. This research does not seek to address the moral implications of this situation but rather the need for revisiting the concept of Western inclusiveness in the case of theocratic countries. The researchers’ suggestion is that textbooks published by the education ministries of Iran or any other theocratic countries should promote and build a sense of nationhood among their citizens through religion and education, without disregarding other ethnic and religious minorities. However, textbook writers, educators, teachers, and school authorities should not go to extremes in highlighting minority groups in theocratic countries.

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