

## Making Literacy through Technology in Appropriating Languages to Context: An Iranian Experience

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### **Abstract**

The process of learning another language is appropriating the language as one's own to mediate the thoughts and the world to the user. This paper addresses this concept through lived experiences of a teacher teaching at the tertiary level in Iran by making literacy alive within the dialogic process of learning and teaching with participants who are the university students of Alzahra University and another staff member who is one of the authors. The research narrative highlights the complementation of using another language utterance when using the English that is appropriated within the Iranian and Muslim context. This is observed within the vignettes of practice using visual media and Web2 tools like *Edmodo* in dialogic exchanges and course instruction. The authenticity of language use among the students is observable in their discussion of various topics as they appropriate the English for their own despite the linguistic errors which could be noted. This suggests that there is a need to further study the possibilities of making literacy in English for speakers of other languages who have different cultural and religious practices, especially for teachers of language.

**Keywords:** teaching, languages, literacy, sociocultural, CALL

## **1. Introduction**

What is language? Do we look at language merely in terms of grammar and vocabularies? Or, is there more to language and how it is appropriated to give affordances to the user in his/her literacy development? It seems that we understand what language means to people from the perspective of language learners. Most of the time people seem to think language is only for communication and access to knowledge, especially as a second language. In the non-English speaking countries, most people have only the very basic command of English which is applied in selective contexts. In Iran, university students sense the need for better competence as they access the abundant academic literature and participate in world conferences. This is because the language learning concentrated mostly around the surface linguistic elements while there seems to be more to what a language is. Social activities and practices are implicit within the use of language. Gee differentiates the language in use (linguistic pieces) as discourse and the language in use with other things as Discourse, with the capital 'D' (1999, 2002). He says that language has two main functions: one is to support the performance of social activities and social identities; and two, to support human affiliations within cultures, social groups and institutions. It is an approach towards minds, bodies, social interactions, social groups, and institutions such as the following quote. *...All life for all of us is just a patchwork of thoughts, words, objects, events, actions, and interactions in Discourses* (Gee 2005, p.7). It means that language is the artifact that we use every moment of our lives which involve all social and cultural interactions. But, as Muslims, this patchwork is a means to understanding meaning of life as engulfed by Existence which is the destination that these patchworks form the road to be traveled (Kamal 2006). So the language is not merely definable as a tool that is static but becomes alive in the lifeworld usage and intentionality of the users (Macann, 1993).

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century where communication is digital and global, English language learning and teaching has flourished in most foreign countries, including Iran. Most of the ELT curriculum in Iranian secondary schools tend to focus on the linguistic competence of the language and the measurement of the product of the teaching (due to the National College Entrance Examination; the English language module) although the communicative aspect is also emphasized. Many Iranians, both young and old, pose questions to us as native speakers of English which are related more to *knowing how* about the language like: *How can I improve my vocabulary? Which accent is better? How do I pronounce, write, or learn English?* These only reflect the surface forms of

the language which have their own importance but it is the whole picture of the concept of language as an artifact which is appropriated and made into one's own that mediates between the word and the user (Wertsch 1991) that has more significance. As teachers in the English Department of Alzahra University in Tehran it has been our privilege to research on our practice or profession, especially related to learning and teaching beyond the linguistic forms of language. It is the literacy that gives a person the tools necessary to cope with reality, to re-think and reflect on the immense flow of information, to select and respond appropriately to contexts (Kress 1997, Barton 2007) and thereby becoming the best we can as human beings (Kalin 2010). The literacy is not the standard view of just the act of encoding and decoding, sometimes labeled as autonomous literacy (Street 1984), but the other which is blended with concepts of language, knowledge, beliefs and sociocultural heritage of a person. Thus this research paper reflects the phenomenological journey of one of the authors who attempted to exercise the insights of her own Discourse learning in three languages to her practice as a university teacher of English in Iran in the hopes of opening the door for the learners to also pursue the deep learning leading to literacy for life. My journey has been one of self-study of practice research to seek understanding and development within my practice as a teacher. What I am/was studying is not just to understand what I do as a teacher and how I do it, but also about how to improve the practice. The improvement comes as changes and improvisations within the classroom evolve in order to scaffold and guide the learners on their learning journey (Bruner 1999). Beyond that is the picture in my mind of the members of the classroom who I see as players interacting in the carnival (Bakhtin 1981). But the main transformation is upon me, the researcher and practitioner because of the contact and conflict within the ecology of practice.

## **2. Literacy, Knowledge and Discourse**

There are many definitions or viewpoints about literacy. Traditionally, it is in relation to literature that indicates the level of awareness and familiarity in literary works. Prior to the printing revolution, anyone who was literate had read extensively which was more philosophy and religion. These texts were mostly handed down from masters to apprentices or kept within an elite group. Then there is the neutral definition of literacy which focuses upon the skills of reading and writing (Street 1984). It is neutral in the sense that only the encoding and decoding aspect of literacy is the guiding principle. Literacy is also tinged with political shadings as UNESCO (Declaration of Persepolis 1975) has defined it and the experiences that Paulo Freire

(1972) had with the Brazilian farmers reflect. There are also many topical literacies such as the electronic literacy, visual literacy, media literacy and so on where the literacy seems to represent an 'expertise' or knowledge. Therefore, it could be said that literacy is multilayered similar to an onion. One of the concepts of literacy is related to learning and knowledge development which is both conscious and unconscious (Kress, 1997). In other words it is the process of reading the word, the world, and the self (Masny 2006; Gee 1996) through the concepts that are in constant flux of formation and transformation in interaction with the texts which are experienced and sensed (Semetsky 2006) in dialogic exchanges (Bakhtin 1981). So the acquisition of knowledge or literacy is multifaceted (oral, written, visual) and multimodal (texts in written form of paper, the computer assisted, and web-2 tools). In total it would seem that the concept of the learning process is the literacy one acquires which is cognitive, social and knowledgeable (Brice-Heath 1983).

For much of the 20th century, learning had focused on the acquisition of skills or transmission of information or what we define as "learning about". Then, near the end of the 20th century learning theorists started to recognize the value of "learning to be", of putting learning into a situated context that deals with systems and identity as well as the transmission of knowledge. We want to suggest that now even that is not enough. Although learning about and learning to be worked well in a relatively stable world, in a world of constant flux, we need to embrace a theory of learning to become. Where most theories of learning see becoming as a transitional state toward becoming something, we want to suggest that the 21st century requires us to think of learning as a practice of becoming over and over again (Siemens 2006). So, what does this mean? It would give the rationale for coming to the University for becoming a participant of a life world to acquire information or knowledge. In this case it can probably be said that this sort of acquisition of knowledge is to gain knowledge *about* which then focuses on the what and where issues rather than the knowledge *of* which is about the how and why. Knowledge building goals are to expand the knowledge in real as well as in problem –solving situations which come from searching about something and then expanding on the various relationships which are detected (Scardamelia and Bereiter 2006). In other words it is more constructive and meaning-making within an interactive process similar to a network of connections that knowing comes from knowledge and its sense in reality (Siemens 2006). But the schools are not promoting the knowledge building; rather they require certain knowledge

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*about* since it is a declarative knowledge (Biggs and Tang 2007). When knowledge is acquired for the sake of information which is to pass a course or exam, the learner cannot make use of it in his/her real life situations. It is the knowledge that is constantly developing and creating further knowledge that is good and not the stagnant one which can lead towards ignorance. This is probably why Hazrat Ali (a.s.) in his *Nahj-ul Balagha* has said “*Acquire some piece of knowledge every day.*” The development and growth requires building, synthesizing, and transforming the knowledge to make knowing a dynamic process.

### **2.1. Praxis**

One of the basic courses that English Literature majors must take in the first year is *Goftvashenud*, an oral/aural communication class. The emphasis is on speaking and listening while spot learning about the English language as they use it. In order to illustrate and provide samples of texts of language in use, the media was incorporated into the syllabus. With further awareness of different contexts of language use, the learners participated in various social practices like complementing or giving condolences. These discourses did not reflect the linguistic elements only but the various Discourses in which both oral and written texts are involved in a social context which is interactive (Gee, 2001). Small communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) were formed within the classroom. These communities were the learners with learners, learners to teacher and the histories of both the teacher and learners where the classroom became the site of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981) or nexus of discourses (Scollon 2001). Heteroglossia (literally in original Russian is ‘different speech-ness’) here means the multiple voices within the setting of education where the learner is subject to a rich and varied range of utterances and is encouraged to participate in the discourse. In this setting, the speaking subject both absorbs and works with language, putting it to use, then interrogating it through interpretation, analysis, reflection and revision. This is the dialogic nature of language which is alive with the push and pull of conformity as well as creativity which Bakhtin labels the centrifugal and centripetal activity (1981). The centrifugal and centripetal activity is the attraction and disassociation of the utterance. The *language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speakers’ intentions* (Bakhtin 1981:294). If we take the utterance (which could be a word or phrase) as the unit of measure for language, we learn the particularity for each social context by recognizing and appropriating the tool for

personal use (Wertsch 1991, Wells 1999). These are the different speech genres as Bakhtin says and Discourses which have been differentiated with the capital *D* (Gee 1996).

### **3. Participants in their Context**

Marie is a Korean-American who has been living and teaching in Iran over the last thirty years. Having grown up with two languages and then learning a third in her adulthood, Marie brought her own language appropriation experiences and history to the site of research. As a practitioner, Marie lived in the environment of learning processes, teaching methodologies, and re-searching of the participants. Her second home was an all-women's national university nestled in the village west of Vanak Square which is in the northern part of Tehran. Every year a group of fresh undergraduates enter the university after passing the national Entrance Exams. It is with this group that her relationship begins in the *Goftvashenud* (Speaking and Listening) course. This is one of the basic courses all English majors must take in their first year and the focus is upon communicative use of the language. She tries to create an interactive environment within the classroom by use of visual and audio artifacts like movies and various media clips as well as several websites. In this way circles of community of practice were established or attempted to be established. These circles were the learners amongst learners, learners and teacher and the teacher's history where the flow of the classroom appeared chaotic. Upon first exposure to this experience, the learners of the *Goftvashenud* (Oral/Aural) were confused since they were not used to such contexts of learning. They expected a textbook from which the information for a final exam would be acquired to pass them for the next stage of learning. This is typical learning of the secondary school where the traditional method of having selected information within the grade level would be tested to pass the learner to the next level. In these defined contexts learning was usually restricted to the descriptive format more than the praxis of knowledge. Most of the time, the students would be concerned in rote memory of the 'information' or the declarative knowledge which would then be tested as the exit from the course and entry to another level. It has been noted in various studies that when students are focused on the declarative knowledge, they cannot differentiate when to expand or apply the knowledge to further their development by producing more knowledge (Kramsch 2002; Biggs & Tang 2007). Therefore in Marie's classroom there was an un-learning of old restrictions or *hejab* to their learning.

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Marie, a Korean by birth and an American by citizenship, had experienced the dynamic heteroglossic nature of language as she learned English as a child and again Farsi as an adult. In each case, an institutional environment focused upon the linguistic nature of the language whereas it was in learning to understand and sense the use of the language that made it hers. For instance, when she was learning English as a child, the school taught her the grammar and the knowledge content of autonomous literacy that a school's curriculum is responsible for. This was sufficient for her to become fluent in communicating school literacy but when it came to social and cultural use, she learned from movies and extensive readings starting with comic books and then progressing to all literatures. Movies showed her the contexts of language in use in the sociocultural frame or the Discourses wherein it felt right. Concepts like *puritan work ethics* and metaphors of English like *apple pie* which is beyond the actual pastry would have been difficult for a child growing up in a Korean family to appropriate and use in proper contexts. The movies visually indicated the Discourse as if actually experiencing the sociocultural practice. Thus she applied the same strategy to her teaching.

In her classroom, what the students brought into this context was something to share and appreciate as new worlds to be peeked at. Most of them were between 18-26 years old and unmarried with an occasional student returning to academics from her married life to find a new path as her children have grown up. It is customary for all single, unmarried women to live with their parents if they are from Tehran but the ones from other cities live in the campus dormitory with an occasional few who find lodgings outside the campus. The learners are homogenous in terms of language which is Farsi but have ethnic and regional diversity in sociocultural beliefs and dialects. The women who come from the north differ in accent from those who come from Esfahan. From the western part of the country they are mostly bilinguals speaking Turkish and Kurdish whereas the Persian Gulf region would bring speakers of Arabic. There are also those who come from religious centers like Qom and Mashhad as well as the historical cities of Kashan and Shiraz. They may all speak the national language but some have their own dialects or language which is used orally in their regions and homes. Some of the learners have been out of the academia to work, to travel or to just have some time off. Thus the knowledge they bring to the place of interaction are also diverse.

### **3.1. The Practice**

The usual routine of the class was to get set up with the computers since the location was the multimedia center. Their class was held in this center where the seats were arranged in two semi-circles in the shape of a flattened horseshoe around the teacher's desk and the projector screen behind the teacher's desk. With 28 computers and 30 or more students, the room would become quite busy and noisy as the circles of communities began to form. Clusters of learners with occasional loner dispersed among them turned their computers on and began their task of accessing the web2 which included the emails, downloads, different language sites and news as they waited for the teacher to set up her equipment. This was a time for learners to greet, to catch up on internet access or to quietly review their past activities. Suddenly the student computers would receive the **locked** notice and everyone would turn to the instructor. The plan for the session needed to be given and tasks assigned which would be done within the circles to be shared later on. At this point, the classroom became a typical teacher-centered classroom. But, ten minutes later, the circles of activity started and the humming of soft voices penetrated the room as each circle became busy with their tasks. The tasks were related to using English in discussing new exposures despite having problems with non-ready-made concepts on *Edmodo*, or listening to video clips and discussing them amongst themselves. The learners were using the language to work on their tasks as well as helping each other by sharing tacit knowledge and experience to enlighten the concepts being learned. The instructor roved around the room, dropping in on circles to see what they had to say or answering questions and guiding the learners. Questions directed to the instructor were related to meaning and concepts of vocabulary in different contexts which were more of pragmatic nature. Most of the time, utterances that they listened from clips like "Lucy in the sky with diamonds" which referred to the Beatles from a movie called *I am Sam* or the significance of homonyms, bear/bear in *Over the Hedge*. The answers would be given as supplementary explanation and cross-cultural in terms of relating the Discourse to the learners' social practice by referring to the use of poetry in Farsi as well as metaphorical use of lexical items. Sometimes the answers directed at an inquiry that the learner should attempt to engage in with dictionary or internet search which usually involved general topics. In the end their reflections of the activities or discussions would be summarized and emailed to the instructor.



### **3.1.1. Vignettes of Practice**

One of the first topics a language learner is normally taught is how to make greetings. In English it is usually *hello* or *hi*. But Marie chooses *Salaam* which is a Muslim's greeting. Most of the students are puzzled, jolted or amused as they pick up her lead. Others look strangely at her but do not say anything considering that she is the teacher although there is usually a bold one among each group who gets enough courage to ask 'why' or to insist with the 'hello'. As teacher/researcher, Marie reflects upon how the learner opens the issue, as in the history of her teaching, again, this learning becomes personal and memorable, especially where her students' life worlds come into conflict. She then explains that greetings are cultural social behavior and as Muslims, we should follow our own etiquette since we say *Salaam* for greeting rather than the western one. As an example she narrates the experience she had when she was an undergraduate at University of Washington in Seattle. She reflected how superficial it was to say 'hi' to anybody one met on the campus and walk on by. That was just an utterance with no real meaning or something of a monologic relationship, like the *I/It* (Buber 1958; Bakhtin 1981). Other times, given the extralinguistic elements like tone of voice and facial gestures, meaning was constructed when two friends met (Goffman 1959). For the Muslim, the greeting of *Salaam* has more value in that it recognizes the community and also the necessity of answering or responding which shows the deeper meaning of the Discourse practice. She reminds them that it is the same in Korean. Koreans do not say 'hi' to Koreans but use their own form of greeting. In essence a greeting plays the function of opening or acknowledging the other but the value and depth of meaning varies in its use and culture.

It could be said that she has appropriated the greeting as her own through the identity of being a Muslim. This meant that it was important for her to identify herself as well as respect the cultural etiquette of Muslims. Saying *salaam* followed by *good morning* was a small incident but it had a tension which awakens the participants to reflect, revise or appropriate. Language has its own contexts which is specific to the source community that uses it. In this case, English and being Muslim have different contexts which are not contradictory but could easily be complementary. It is important for learners to know that they can still retain their worldview while using another language. As a result, within the email exchanges between the students and Marie, most would start with *Hi* at the beginning of the semester but towards the end, other learners also appropriated the greeting. This was also a part of ideological becoming (Bakhtin

1981) which refers to how we develop our way of viewing the world, our system of ideas in becoming our ideological self just as in literacy there is the autonomous and the ideological (Street, 1984). This small incident was not to emphasize her beliefs but to show that embedded in languages are cultural and social practices of discourse which is not necessarily appropriated for all purposes. Once meaning is constructed while retaining one's identity, the language becomes closely interwoven within our thoughts and social behavior (Wertsch 1991). Along with appropriation is the autonomy and authenticity of the language learning (vanLier 1996).

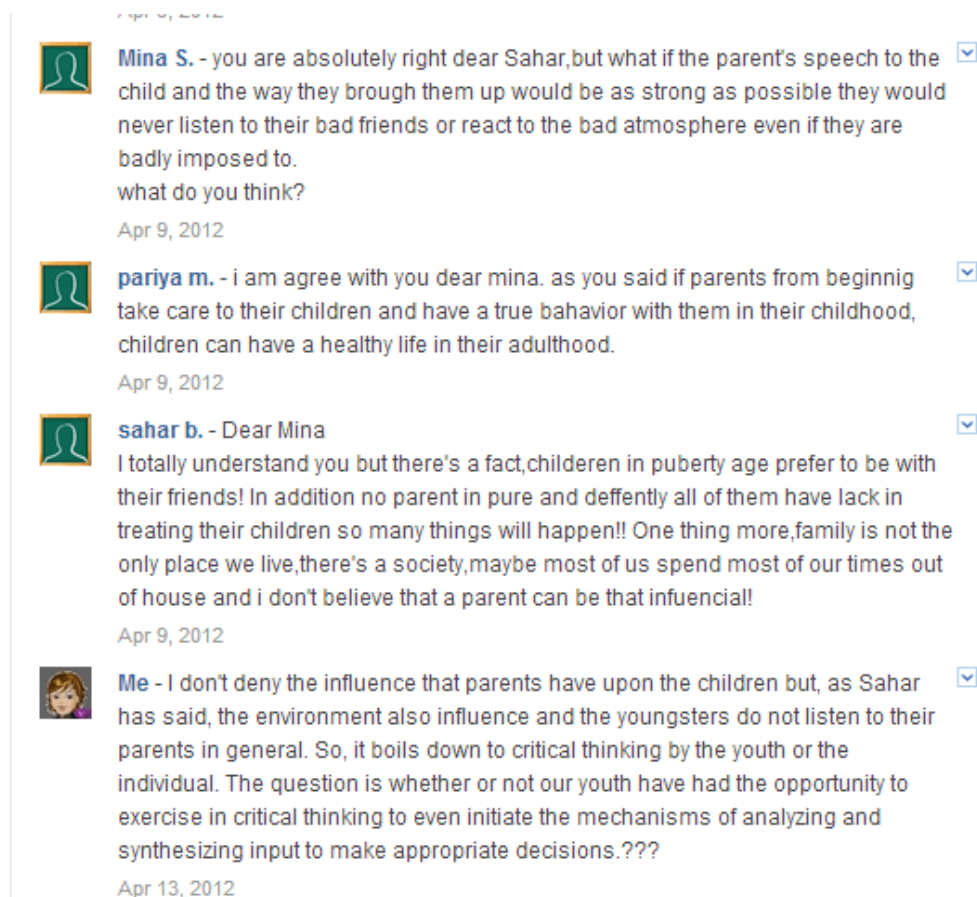
When there is a common language and culture, is it necessary to practice the etiquettes of the target language? From our experiences, it seems more lucid and dynamic to combine the language, culture and etiquette rather than to focus solely on the linguistic form. Vygotsky (1978) says that word meanings are dynamic rather than static formations. The relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought (Wertsch, 1991). Thus, it has been our practice to encourage the students to retain certain aspects of cultural beliefs and practices that are unique to Iranians as the original interspersed in their English use. They are made aware when and how the English equivalent will be relevant as the situation arises. Throughout the class session, utterances of *alhamdulillah* (praise be to Allah) and *enshallah* (Allah Willing) could be heard from the Instructor as she talked and discussed various issues. It would have been easy to use the English version but Marie indicated that the sense of the Arabic utterance was more than the English equivalent. She also said that it had become a reflection of her thoughts when these utterances were automatically used interspersed with her English. Again at the end of a class session, the learners like to express their appreciation for the effort of the instruction activity and would say *may your hands not hurt* or *don't be tired*. This is the literal translation of the Farsi *dast eh shoma dard nakoneh* which is a nicety that is metaphorically applied to all work and effort. As a consequence of the puzzled look, the students repeat in Farsi and then she would tell them that, in English, it is sufficient to only say *thank you*. In comparison, the phrase *thank you* seemed so blunt and short after the niceties that Farsi expressed. Then the students would continue throughout the term using Farsi for this utterance rather than to translate.

#### **4. Reflection**

The context in which our learners are living is one where the use of the English language occurs only in the classrooms, media and new media. Therefore, the use of internet has been a supplementary help to provide an outlet for practice and exchange. Aside from emails as a source of correspondence and contact, the tool, *Edmodo* (screenshot A) was introduced and incorporated into the *Goftvashenud* course. *Edmodo* is a secure platform for educators to create discussion groups and asynchronous interactive activity for its members. The interactivity is through written form of discussions on various issues that the learners participated. These discussions were reflections of their thoughts which were mostly edited by them before being posted. So, it was not truly spontaneous language production since they had means to edit the writing but still reflected the thought process. When using the various tools on the Web2, the learners were given the freedom to reflect and use the language to practice what they had appropriated as their own in English. These were also filled with clichés and memorized routines of answering the task at hand to which the instructor inserted questions to help them try to go beyond to bring their own authenticity and identity, both in their emails and the *Edmodo* discussion threads.

In most cases, they would start with the usual English greeting and parts of their writing indicated their thoughts which were not lucid English but translated Farsi niceties. It was interesting to see how the students appropriated the English with their own identity of being Iranian. Opening comments like *my dear...or hi dear guys* that was used by the learners was awkward at first. But, then, upon reflection, we realized that the niceties that are in the Iranian culture were retained in the appropriation of the language. In English *dear* is an endearment which is usually used in particular cases but these niceties are part of the etiquette in social interaction and conversations for the Iranian. Since the purpose of using the *Edmodo* was for the learners to practice real experiences with English, they were not corrected. In view of what language learning and literacy is, it was rewarding to see the learners' dialogic interaction rather than to focus upon the linguistic knowledge. A sample discussion thread is given below where the learners are discussing the issue of 'drug addictions' along with the participation of the Instructor identified as "me". Screenshot A mirrors many other discussion threads held by the students of *Goftvashenud*. Mina, Pariya and Sahar discuss the influence of parents and family on the youth in relation to drug addiction. One can see linguistic errors as well as the appropriation of English in the form of literal translation like *I am agree with you dear mina*. It also reflects the

niceties which are part of the Discourse for an Iranian. The Instructor also participates by trying to bring in critical thinking with questions to direct the participants to further their cognitive development.



The screenshot shows a vertical thread of four comments in a discussion forum. Each comment includes a profile picture icon, the user's name, the text of the comment, and a date. The first comment is from Mina S. (Apr 9, 2012), the second from pariya m. (Apr 9, 2012), the third from sahar b. (Apr 9, 2012), and the fourth from Me (Apr 13, 2012). Each comment has a small downward arrow icon to its right.

**Mina S.** - you are absolutely right dear Sahar, but what if the parent's speech to the child and the way they brought them up would be as strong as possible they would never listen to their bad friends or react to the bad atmosphere even if they are badly imposed to.  
what do you think?  
Apr 9, 2012

**pariya m.** - i am agree with you dear mina. as you said if parents from beginning take care to their children and have a true behavior with them in their childhood, children can have a healthy life in their adulthood.  
Apr 9, 2012

**sahar b.** - Dear Mina  
I totally understand you but there's a fact, children in puberty age prefer to be with their friends! In addition no parent in pure and definitely all of them have lack in treating their children so many things will happen!! One thing more, family is not the only place we live, there's a society, maybe most of us spend most of our times out of house and i don't believe that a parent can be that influential!  
Apr 9, 2012

**Me** - I don't deny the influence that parents have upon the children but, as Sahar has said, the environment also influence and the youngsters do not listen to their parents in general. So, it boils down to critical thinking by the youth or the individual. The question is whether or not our youth have had the opportunity to exercise in critical thinking to even initiate the mechanisms of analyzing and synthesizing input to make appropriate decisions.???  
Apr 13, 2012

Screenshot1. Partial thread of discussion on drug addictions

However, the fact that we have differences of discourse practices were pointed out indirectly when we had our film viewing where many social discourse practices of the English language were compared and contrasted with Farsi. For example the contrast between coffee and tea was discussed. In the movie, *I am Sam*, the symbolic references to coffee within the American Discourse was portrayed by *Starbuck*. The students understood the need for caffeine injection because the Iranians also have this affinity towards tea. What was different was the converging of the coffee within the public social practices in the American society whereas tea is still more within the bounds of private social Discourses for the Iranian. Other practices which were related to family were also contrasted. In *Over the Hedge* the main character was a raccoon, RJ who was

a family of one. He comes in contact with a group of foragers in the woods and takes advantage of them to gather items he must pay back to the bear. The point was that a family looks out for its members by helping when needed and respecting each other. But the western society has been growing towards that family of one and the Iranian family is numerous with very influential support system. As the learners watch the movie, we also discuss various pros and cons that are brought up which is part of literacy and knowing knowledge.

## **5. Concluding Statement**

As practitioners, the perspective that we have now would have been more useful for us when we first started teaching. The lived experiences and narratives of teachers in Islamic countries are few in number. It is not so much the epistemology but how we can apply and seek the best means to prepare our learners to prepare for the real world as well as being themselves. Sometimes they know how is there but the sense of how to put it to use and understanding the process of learning is vague. In education, it seems that we are sometimes blinded by that certificate at the end of the program as we aim to finish the tasks to be awarded with a certification of accomplishment to be acknowledged by society. Retrospectively Marie saw that unconsciously her teaching goals were to promote empathy and intersubjectivity by attempting to create the context for acting on the new media technology with past experiences of intentionality. By encouraging her learners to go beyond the surface skills and requirements of the course, it was expected that they would try to aim for understanding learning to use it in their contexts, especially as Muslims and Iranians. What she did not realize was that the drive for learning was not always apparently awake in all learners and it required more than just creating the environment for learners to select and appropriate. She realizes now that if she had been aware of some of these aspects while becoming a teacher, she would have been more aware of the complexities involved. There is no answer that fits all but it may help to make the learning in educational institutions become more rewarding than just to achieve a certification for a job or social status as glimpses of the dynamic classroom activities are shared. It is hoped that further research upon the living experiences of teachers, learners and their learning in the language classrooms will help enhance the aspects needed for deep learning leading to literacy for life.

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