

Beyond *alef*, *be*, *pe*: the socialisation of incipient ideology through literacy practices in an Iranian first-grade classroom

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This article examines the interrelationship between literacy and the socialisation of incipient ideology. We focus on one first-grade classroom in Tehran, Iran, as students and teacher engage in a complex literacy event centering on a lesson from the national reader, *bekhaanim* (*Let's Read*). In the course of this textually driven meaning-making activity, we observe how participants explore and respond to elements of school-based language use as it unfolds explicitly and implicitly. The three-part structure of the IRF (teacher initiation–student response–teacher feedback) serves as the primary vehicle through which explicit teaching of content and behavior occurs. However, it is also this structure that serves as the primary vehicle for implicitly constituted school-situated dynamics where first-grade Iranian boys are socialised into values of their society – values of respect and reverence for authority, friendship, brotherhood, and solidarity – while experiencing their first exposure to the literacy practices of spelling, reading, and writing.

Keywords: IRE/IRF; language of schooling; literacy practices; talk-in-interaction; ideology; *ta'lim* and *tarbiyyat*

Introduction

Literacy practices, i.e., the ways in which texts are written, read, interpreted, talked about, and applied, are firmly rooted within, if not integral to, the broader frame of the sociocultural environment in which they unfold (Bruner, Olver, & Greenfield, 1966; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1982, 1983; R. Scollon & S.W. Scollon, 1979, 1981; Scollon, 2001; Scribner, 1997; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Literacy, as practiced at home and in schools, religious institutions, government, medical encounters, commercial interactions, and daily activities, is not reducible to simple issues of reading and writing; it embodies an entire network of culture, values, ideologies, and belief systems that comprise the local culture of smaller social groups and the global culture of nation (Freeden, 1996; Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity, 1998; Street, 1995).

This article examines literacy practices in an all-boys first-grade classroom in Tehran, Iran. In particular, we focus on school-based language, driven and shaped essentially by the text of the first-grade reader that is central to the majority of class activities. Through the vehicle of the IRE/IRF (teacher initiation–student response–teacher evaluation/teacher

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Note on the article title: *Alef*, *be*, *pe* refers to the first three letters in the Persian alphabet, corresponding generally to A, B, C.

initiation–student response–teacher feedback) format (Mehan, 1979; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975, 1992; van Lier, 1996; Zhang Waring, 2008), the teacher explicitly imparts information concerning letters, numbers, and words, in addition to appropriate classroom behavior. More powerfully, through this same vehicle of interactional exchange, the teacher imparts institutional, cultural, religious, and national values, on a predominantly implicit level. The teacher is the pivotal figure within these interactions and the embodiment of absolute authority – authority over instructional content and over students’ behavior. She is at once instructor of letters, benevolent mother, disciplinarian, and task evaluator.

The discursive patterns reveal instructional dynamics whereby the teacher and her 20 young schoolboys collectively embody the practices and values of what is considered an ‘ideal person’ in modern Islamic-Iranian society – a ‘society imbued with spirituality and ethics’ (Mehran, 2003a, p. 315), and the idealised values of equality and harmony. That is, throughout the interactions, we see the emergence of a societal value system in which individuals function collectively and cooperatively for the creation of a common good (Mehran, 1992, 2003a; Shorish, 1988). We find displayed visibly around the classroom and embodied in the teacher’s and students’ interactional behaviors, an ideology of civic social order based on concepts of Iranian national identity coupled with Iranian-Islamic values (Holliday, 2011; Mehran, 1992, 2003a; Science Applications International Corporation, 2007).

The theoretical groundwork for our analysis is that of language socialisation (Clancy, 1986; He, 2004; Kang, 2004; Ochs, 1988, 1996, 2004; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Platt, 1986; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) whereby children and other novices learn to become competent members of their society and/or sociocultural group through situated participation with other more expert members of society, including parents, teachers, older siblings, and so forth. By analysing these interactions within their moment-by-moment unfolding, we observe the multiple ways in which these locally grounded literacy practices reflect aspects of the broader culture of the Iranian institution of public school.

Crucially, through the lens of a language socialisation perspective, the dynamics in which the teacher creates and embodies the national, social, and institutional values of school emerge predominantly at the implicit level. That is, through the provision of explicit, content-related linguistic information, the teacher is simultaneously imparting implicit values concerning the expected behaviors of the boys as first-grade students in the locally situated context as well as expectations of them as young citizens of Iran.

Iranian public education

The Ministry of Education in Iran, called *vezarateh amoozesh va parvareh* (lit. the Ministry for Education and Nurturing), oversees the curriculum and materials for all levels of preprimary, primary, and secondary education. Preprimary education is an optional, one-year program for five-year-olds. Children begin their compulsory formal education at age 6 in the first grade. Primary education continues until Grade 5 (ages 6–10). The secondary education system includes Grades 6–11, divided into two equal, three-year-long programs – lower secondary education (ages 11–13) and upper secondary education (14–17). All schools are single sex. The British Council report (British Council, n.d.) estimates that there are 113,000 schools throughout the country, teaching in excess of 18 million children.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics reports that 53% of Iranian children were enrolled in preprimary programs in 2006. Preschool classes are half-day morning sessions that meet from 7:30 to 12:00 (noon), with three 15-minute breaks. The preprimary curriculum centers on the teaching of vocabulary and concepts related to nature and the environment, such as

zameen ‘earth’, *khorsheed* ‘sun’, *abr* ‘cloud’, *baaraan* ‘rain’, *barf* ‘snow’, *garm* ‘warm’, *sard* ‘cold’, and so forth. This is accomplished using pictures and instances of realia, not written language. Preschool children do not learn to read or write the alphabet. In fact, the teaching of early literacy skills, including the actual reading and writing of the Persian alphabet,¹ is typically reserved for the first-grade teachers.

At the preprimary level, children learn basic numeracy skills. They practice counting, learn simple calculations, and also learn to both read and write the numeric Arabic symbols 1–10. Preschool children are also exposed to concepts of health and hygiene, family relationships, and friendship. They receive their first set of school supplies (pencils, books, and notebooks) and learn how to take care of them so that they will be able to use them properly in the first grade.

Entering the first grade, children are not expected to know how to read or write. Parents and preschool teachers accept and yield to the tradition that it is the job of the first-grade teacher to introduce children to letters – with the goal of both recognising the printed symbol and properly reproducing its shape in writing. It is in the first grade that children are formally taught the grapheme-phoneme correspondences; they learn how to write individual letters, how to combine letters into words, and how to build those words into simple sentences.

The first-grade textbook, *bekhaanim* ‘*Let’s Read*’ is published by the Institute of Textbook Publication and Distribution, under the direction of the Ministry of Education. It is 120 pages long, and is divided into four main sections: *negaarehaa* ‘images’, *aamuzesh neshanehaa I* ‘teaching the signs (i.e. letters of the alphabet) I’, *aamuzesh neshanehaa II* ‘teaching the signs (i.e. letters of the alphabet) II’, and *ravaan khaani* ‘fluent reading’. The preface presents a schedule established by the Ministry of Education, designating the specific sections that should be taught during a particular week of school. In this way, all first-grade classes throughout Iran maintain parallel progress by covering the identical material at the identical point in the school term.

The first-grade textbook, then, represents Iranian children’s initiation into the iconic aspects of literacy. Shorish (1988) and Mehran (1989, 1992, 2003a) analysed the *content* of Iranian textbooks at various levels of instruction, from first grade through to adult literacy programs. From the point of view of explicit text, both scholars demonstrated that the compulsory textbooks used at all levels of instruction clearly serve as vehicles for disseminating and reinforcing religious and political ideologies, with the religious being inextricably linked to the political. Shorish pointed to the ‘political symbols and great personalities of Islam and the present Iranian leadership’ (1988, p. 59). Mehran indicated that ‘literacy education in Iran is a traditional program, limited to teaching the three Rs [reading, writing, and arithmetic] and propagating the Islamic culture’ (1992, p. 200).

This study will contribute to existing literature on Iran and its educational and literacy practices. We provide a rare ethnographic perspective on how literacy practices unfold in this Iranian classroom, with a particular focus on the initial exposure to text in the first-grade reader *bekhaanim* ‘*Let’s Read*’. Using a conversation analytic (CA) framework in conjunction with an IRE/IRF orientation to classroom discourse, we demonstrate how the teaching of early literacy, i.e., letters of the alphabet, orthography, and the construction of words and simple sentences, meshes seamlessly with the teaching of culture and cultural values, in both explicit and implicit ways. Among the values that we address are those of ‘justice and fairness’ and the cooperative striving for the common good (Mehran, 1992, 2003a; Shorish, 1988). Further, throughout these interactions, we witness the educational dynamics of *tarbiyyat*, a pedagogical term mildly similar to Western concepts of ‘training/fostering/nourishing’ (Shorish, 1988, p. 61) and *ta’lim*, the imparting of objective knowledge (Aryanpur-Kashani and Aryanpur-Kashani 1986), including the process of indirect learning through inference-making (Shorish, 1988, p. 61).

In the moment-by-moment analysis of turn exchanges, we observe the mechanisms by which the teacher and her 20 schoolboys engage in basic literacy activities, while implicitly constructing what it means to be a model citizen (Mehran, 1992) of Iranian society. In this way, the study will contribute more broadly to the body of literature on formal schooling and language socialisation.

In the sections that follow, we present an overview of the literature on language socialisation, an ethnographic description of the setting, followed by a description of the data and methodology. We then present our analysis of the teacher's and students' discourse using a CA perspective. We focus on how the classroom discourse unfolds, and more specifically, on how multiple aspects of the interactional dynamics between teacher and students both create and perpetuate a classroom culture reflective of the sociocultural values of modern Iran.

Language socialisation and literacy events

Language socialisation refers to the situated interactional processes by which newcomers to a sociocultural group and novices in a discourse community or institution come to acquire communicative norms and participate competently in that group, community, or institution (Clancy, 1986; He, 2004; Kang, 2004; Ochs, 1988, 1996, 2004; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984, 2001; Platt, 1986; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Primary socialisation involves those processes through which children learn to talk and interact with family and caregivers in home environments. Secondary socialisation centers on individuals learning to participate as newcomers within social contexts beyond the family and home, e.g. in school, clubs, teams, business, professions, government, and so forth (Duranti, 2001, p. 259).

Central to both primary and secondary levels of socialisation is the perspective that the process is not simply unilateral or unidirectional, where parents/experts teach and children/novices learn and thereby acquire communicative norms. Rather, it necessarily involves 'both socialization through language and socialization to use language . . . [That is] children and other novices in society acquire tacit knowledge of principles of social order and systems of belief through exposure to and participation in language-mediated interactions' (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 2). By participating in culture-specific situated activities and interacting with more skilled partners, children and other novices are apprenticed into the particular sociocultural practices that are appropriate to those activities – in the process of learning to speak and use language routinely, they also learn what it means to be a member of that sociocultural group (Rogoff, 1990), including role-related information such as male/female, teacher/student, adult/child, class member, team member, and even literate citizen.

The kindergarten/first-grade classroom is one of the earliest and perhaps most robust sites of secondary socialisation in most cultures (Duranti, 2001, p. 259). This represents a child's first formal exposure to literacy – typically including explicit instruction on letters (or graphemes), their shapes and sounds, and ultimately, the combinatory potential of letters/graphemes in forming words and then sentences. However, not only do children learn to read and write language, they are socialised into the language of schooling; they acquire both the explicit as well as the 'tacit knowledge' concerning how they are expected to interact: with the teacher, with their peers, and with their texts.

The literacy event, as defined by Heath, is conceptualised as the situated interaction in which 'written language is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies' (1982, p. 50). The focus of this article concerns an extended literacy event in which one Iranian teacher and her all-boys first-grade class work through one chapter of their basal reader. The teacher conducts the class as if students' previous

exposure to written text has been either limited or nonexistent. Throughout these interactions, we witness the ways in which teacher and students attend to grapheme-phoneme correspondences, letter shape recognition, accurate letter production, words appearing in the text, and words and ideas beyond the texts, e.g. emerging from the students' own imaginations.

The letter *fe*, first-grade classroom discourse, and incipient ideology

This classroom lesson is designed and delivered to teach students how to read, write, and pronounce the letter *fe* within various word positions through the textbook content and the teacher's decontextualised routines. Covertly, it also serves to simultaneously impart a rich array of ideological values concerning what it means to be a member of this first-grade class, a member of the Iranian school institution in general, and a child member of modern Iranian society.

In learning to use language through meaningful interaction and contextually situated practice (Ochs, 1996), students in this first-grade class are gradually socialised into the broader values of orderliness, conformity, and discipline; the values of respect and reverence for authority; and the value of brotherhood² – all for the purpose of establishing and maintaining the collective good (Mehran, 1992, 2003a; Shorish, 1988). In situated collaborative interaction, the teacher and her first-grade boys discursively construct the religious and social underpinnings of Iranian-Islamic culture (Mehran, 1992, 2003b).

Ethnography and data analysis

Iranian first-grade classroom

The data for this research consist of extended classroom interaction in an all-boys elementary school in central Tehran, audio- and video-taped onto a CD-ROM format. The video was produced by the Ministry of Education and distributed to all first-grade teachers for training and educational purposes.³ The teachers and classrooms featured in this video set were selected by the Ministry to serve as models for how to effectively teach the content of the textbook *bekhaanim* 'Let's Read'. As 'model' teachers, they were asked to do nothing more than teach the way they normally teach, serving as examples for other teachers to follow. By *textbook content*, we refer to the same elements as discussed by Shorish (1988) and Mehran (1989, 1992, 2003a), i.e. the individual letters of the Persian alphabet, the diacritics required to denote vowel sounds and geminate consonants, and the icons of Islamic culture in Iran (i.e. the Koran, Ayatollah Khomeini, Khatami [the fifth President of Iran, 1997–2005], and elements of the ancient Persian literary tradition).

The interactions that we analyse for this study are from a 60-minute video of a first-grade class of 20 six-year-old boys and one female teacher in her early 30s, Mrs Zand.⁴ The boys are already in the room, seated at their desks, when the video recording begins. Mrs Zand then enters, and all the boys rise to sing, in unison, the ritual greeting song *bonameh aanke baashad mehrabaantar zeh baabaa vaa zeh maadar* 'in the name of the One who is kinder than father and mother'.⁵ The boys remain standing behind their desks as they sing. The teacher nods, smiles, and lip-synchs the words; her hands are clasped together as if in prayer. When the song is over, the boys greet Mrs Zand by saying *salaam khaanoom moallem haaleh shomaa*⁶ *chetoreh?* 'Hello, Mrs Teacher. How are you (deferential form, singular)?' She responds: *khoobam. Haalam kheili khoobe. Bachehaa shomaahaa khoobin?* 'I'm well. I'm very well. Children, are you all well?'. To this, the students all produce a resounding *BALEH*, 'yes!'.

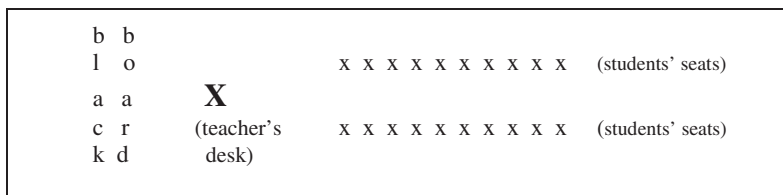


Figure 1. Configuration of classroom.

Mrs Zand is wearing the traditional headscarf (*hejaab*), with a bright, loose-fitting overcape (*manteau*). The boys, dressed in school uniforms, are seated in two long rows perpendicular to the blackboard. The blackboard designates the front of the class. Mrs Zand's rectangular desk is located in front of the blackboard, perpendicular to the two rows of student desks, with 10 seats in each row. Figure 1 indicates the approximate location of the blackboard, the teacher's desk, and the two rows of students' seats.

On the blackboard, written in chalk, appear the words *benaameh khodaayeh mehrabaan* 'in the name of kind God'. The day of the week (*chahaar shanbeh* 'Wednesday') is written in the upper left-hand corner of the board. There are also chalk drawings of the sun and clouds next to the day of the week. Above the blackboard are three rows of cardboard cutouts of train cars – on each car is written one letter of the alphabet, in both upper and lower case. Above the train is a paper replica of the Iranian flag. The wall to the right of the blackboard displays a birdhouse, with a bird perched on it. The wall to the left displays a cardboard picture of a snowman holding a bunch of colorful balloons. Each of the balloons has the Arabic letter *fe* written on it; each is distinct in that it displays *fe* with a different vowel sound, e.g., *faa* (*fe* + alef), *foo* (*fe* + vaa), *fo* (*fe* + [o] diacritic), etc. On this wall, one also observes a selection of paper cutouts of random letters, e.g., *be* [b], *me* [m], *sin* [s], *zeh* [z], *aleph* [α], etc.

The lesson for this day is based on the third section of Lesson 9, entitled *rooze barfi* 'a snowy day'.

The target letter/sound is *fe* [f], the 23rd letter of the Persian alphabet. Throughout the 60-minute lesson, Mrs Zand will be practicing the orthographic and phonetic features of this letter and its sound, including how to recognise and produce its shape in three distinct environments, i.e., word initially (e.g. *faanoos* 'lantern'), word medially (e.g. *kafsh dooz* 'ladybug'), and word-finally (e.g. *barf* 'snow', *kif*, 'school bag').⁷

The teacher begins the lesson immediately following the greeting exchange noted above. On her table is a collection of three-dimensional realia that depict snowy things – cotton balls, a model of a snowman, and an ice cube. She also has a diorama that she constructed that depicts images of a snowy day, the focal component of which is a snowman made from cotton balls.

Throughout the hour, Mrs Zand tends to remain near the blackboard during most of her interaction with the students. She occasionally circulates around the room to check students' individual and group work, and invariably returns to the front, where she resumes her lessons and draws on the board.

It is noteworthy that the teacher is a female in an all-boys classroom. In Iranian public schools, it is only at the elementary level that females can teach male students. It is not uncommon for females to teach in all-boys classrooms, with 61% of all primary school teachers being female (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2008; Mehran, 2003b).

Methodology

The researchers viewed the film multiple times prior to transcribing the speech exchanges and took additional notes concerning the interactions between the teacher and students.

We then transcribed the lesson using a modified version of CA conventions (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), which have been summarised in the Appendix. The interactional data were Romanised to accommodate these conventions; we appealed to Thackston (1993, 2009) for basic Romanisation conventions. The transcripts were organised according to the conversational turn (Sacks et al., 1974). We also noted within the transcripts the basic gestures and other kinesic activity that accompanied the talk.

Using a CA perspective, we examined the talk produced by each participant from the point of view of turn design and organisation. In particular, we noted the patterns through which the teacher initiated and elicited verbal involvement from her students, the nature of the students' responses, and the teacher's follow-up and/or evaluation turns (if produced) in the immediately subsequent position. This tripartite composition of talk-in-interaction, referred to in the literature as the IRE/IRF format, is common to classroom discourse and the discourse of other interactional settings that are centered on elicited displays of knowledge and understanding (Abd-Kadir & Hardman, 2007; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975, 1992; van Lier, 1996; Wells, 1993; Zhang Waring, 2008). The format of this triadic dialogue type (Lemke, 1990; Nassaji & Wells, 2000) is illustrated in the following exchange, adapted from Nassaji and Wells (2000, p. 377):

- | | | |
|---|--|------------|
| T: | Which way did the Wolf go to Red Riding Hood's
Granny's cottage? | Initiation |
| S: | He took a short cut through the forest. | Response |
| T: | That's right. | Evaluation |
| [Not in Nassaji and Wells (2000: 377)]: | | |
| T: | Okay, now let's think about these two words
and how they might be different:
'forest' and 'woods'. | Feedback |

As noted in the above extract, Initiation turns in classroom settings often consist of questions or other dialogic means of eliciting student input. Response turns contain the verbal and nonverbal replies to the Initiation. The third move, i.e., the Feedback/Evaluation turn, may involve an evaluative expression, as in the example above (Evaluation: 'That's right'), and it may be built with relevant follow-up talk, including queries for clarification and/or additional information (Feedback [as added to the original Nassaji and Wells example]: 'Now let's think about these two words and how they might be different: "forest" and "woods"'), or it may contain both Evaluation and Feedback.

From a structural perspective, we appealed to the conversational turn as the primary analytic unit (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 2007). We counted the number of turns produced by each participant and further categorised the speaking moves according to components of triadic dialogue, i.e., Initiation, Response, and Evaluation/Follow-up. We then conducted a fine-grained turn-by-turn analysis of the emergent talk. Through this perspective, we observe precisely how the co-participants orient to the talk at hand, and how they make visible their understandings of what it means to be a member (both as teacher and as students) of this first-grade classroom. A micro-level analysis reveals the implicit philosophy of the teacher as an individual in conjunction with the explicitly and implicitly expressed ideology and values connected with early literacy practices in Iran, especially, the elaborate interweaving of *tarbiyyat* 'fostering and nurturing' with the more objective, scientific, and at times, indirect method of inference-making through *ta'lim*. Crucially, these very values are found within the Persian name of the Ministry of Education, *vezarateh amoozesh va parvareh*, where *amoozesh* corresponds with 'Education' and *ta'lim*, i.e. the imparting of

Table 1. Distribution of turns-at-talk.

Speaker	No. of turns
Teacher	183 (56%)
Student turns	144 (44%)
Class	77
Individual students	67
Total turns	327 (100%)

objective, scientific knowledge, and *parvaresh* corresponds with *tarbiyyat*, i.e. ‘nurturing’, fostering, and the teaching of manners.

Our findings section is organised as follows: (1) discussion of the overall turn length and structure and their relevance to our analytic findings, (2) analysis of Initiation and Response turn designs and the interrelationship between the teacher’s Initiation turns (i.e. yes-no questions, tags, wh-questions, and directives) and the nature of the students’ Response moves, (3) analysis of the teacher’s Evaluation/Follow-up turns as a means of constructing collaborative praise, and (4) discussion of the teacher as imparter of knowledge and creator of the collective good.

Findings

Turn length and structure: creating an impression of harmony and equality, establishing the teacher as authority to be respected

In all, there were a total of 327 turns, with 183 (56%) teacher turns and 144 (44%) student turns, as noted in Table 1.

While the distribution of turns appears to be nearly equal, a closer examination of turn size and shape reveals that the talk produced by the teacher far exceeds that of the students. An analysis of total words per turn by teacher and student indicates a ratio of approximately 13.7:1, as noted in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 presents the breakdown of all student turns, ranging in length from one-word turns (87/144 turns, 60%) to one 14-word turn. Students uttered no more than 329 words during this 60-minute classroom interaction.

Table 2. Student turn lengths ($n = 144$ student turns).

1-word turns (lexical TCU)	87 (60%)
2-word turns	18 (12.5%)
3-word turns	10 (7%)
4-word turns	10 (7%)
5-word turns	5 (3.5%)
6-word turns	4 (3%)
7-word turns	4 (3%)
8-word turns	2 (1.4%)
9-word turns	1 (.07%)
10-word turns	2 (1.4%)
14-word turns	1 (.07%)
Total words	329
Words per turn	$329 \text{ words} \div 144 \text{ turns} = 2.27 \text{ words/turn}$

Table 3. Average number of words per turn-at-talk.

Speaker	Average words/turn
Teacher	31
Students	2.27
Teacher:student	13.7:1

Student turns were exclusively constructed as a single TCU (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 2007), with sentential TCUs comprising the longer turns, and single-content words comprising all 87 lexical TCUs (e.g. *baleh* ‘yes’, *chahaartaa* ‘four (of them)’, *barf* ‘snow’, *faanoos* ‘lantern’, etc.).⁸

The teacher’s turns, in contrast, were predominantly multi-unit turns, composed variably of combinations of attention-seeking devices; activity transition devices; accounts, rationales, and explanations; and requests, directives, interrogatives, and evaluations. As such, the teacher’s turns were significantly longer than the students’ turns.

Table 3 juxtaposes the average length of teacher-produced turns (31 words/turn) and student-produced turns (2.27 words/turn).

Essentially, then, the boys in this traditional first-grade class speak when prompted to do so, and their responses are overwhelmingly brief. In the sections that follow, we provide an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of how the interactions unfold, to uncover the ways in which teacher talk and student talk explicitly and implicitly reflect the sociocultural values of the Iranian institution of school and the cultural ideology in which authority figures must be respected, loved, and obeyed.

Initiation and response design

Crucially, no talk from the students in this data set is produced in the absence of an eliciting device by the teacher. As such, we begin our discussion by focusing first on the teacher’s Initiation turns to gain more insight into the design of the students’ response turns. As is typical of classroom discourse, the teacher’s Initiation turns in our data take the shape of directives and questions. However, an in-depth analysis of these turns reveals a systematic distributional pattern surrounding Mrs Zand’s use of question types: yes-no questions, tag questions, and wh-questions – a distributional pattern that creates control and authority on the one hand and establishes a semblance of harmony, equality, and brotherhood on the other.

Yes-no questions

Within the course of the lesson, Mrs Zand uses the yes-no question type exclusively to focus on and regulate students’ behavior. For example:

- *alaamate sokooto mibini?* ‘Can you see the quiet sign?’
- *bachehaa goosh mikonin?* ‘Children, are you listening to me?’
- *sedaaye zango shenidin?* ‘Did you hear the bell ring?’
- *yaadetoone?* ‘Do you remember (that the ringing of the bell signals group work)?’

This interactional strategy, the most sparse of the three question types discussed, typically targets some immediately occurring instance of negative classroom behavior on the

part of an individual or a small number of students. The teacher's uttering of yes-no questions makes visible and public her evaluation that such behavior is disruptive to the rest of the class and needs to be addressed before continuing; they are miniscule breaks in the continuity of the lesson, while still allowing a seemingly uninterrupted flow in the delivery of the content. The expected response to the yes-no question is typically a nonverbal one, i.e. compliance, as noted in Excerpt 1:

Excerpt 1 ((this is a whole-class activity in which the teacher and students are looking at the pictures in the textbook. The pictures include one of a snowman and a few children standing near it.))

- 1 **T:** *In do[^]taa ba[^]che chi[^] daaran? (0.2) ha[^]r chi daaran be man be[^]goo.*
 'What do these two kids have? Say for me whatever they have'.
 (1.2)
 ((Mrs Zand points to Giv to answer))
- 2 **Giv:** *ki::[^]f, =*
 'Bag'.
 ((some boys near Giv are fidgeting))
- 3 **T:** *= ba[^]che haa goo[^]sh mi[^]konin? Kho:[^]b, =*
 'Are you listening kids? Okay'.
- 4 **Giv:** *= le[^]baase mo:[^]naase::b, =*
 'Appropriate clothes'.
- 5 **T:** *= ba:[^]le: le[^]baase mo[^]naaseb. khe[^]ili moheme:. bo[^]land sohbat ko:[^]n. =*
 'Yes, appropriate clothes. That's very important. Speak louder'.

In the very midst of Giv's response turn (line 2), Mrs Zand interjects a behavior-targeting yes-no question to the few boys near Giv who are not paying attention (line 3). No names are mentioned, no negative behavior is specified. The boys straighten up immediately, and Mrs Zand utters *kho:[^]b* 'good/okay' (line 3), which serves dually as a positive assessment to the boys' obedient response as well as a 'go ahead' signal to Giv, who had been stopped mid-stream in his listing of items that he noticed in the picture. Giv was clearly prepared to present more than one observation, as indicated by the stressed and elongated vowel sound and the semi-rising word-final intonation in his single word turn, '*ki::[^]f*' 'bag' (line 2). Remarkably, the teacher's behavior-targeting discourse is seamlessly interwoven into the ongoing content-based talk, and the outcomes of both types of talk, i.e. listing relevant observations and attentive listening, are successfully achieved (lines 4 and 5).

All of the yes-no questions in this data set are designed to elicit an affirmative response, while implicitly casting an assumption that the negative is true, i.e. *alaamate sokooto mibini?* 'Can you see the quiet sign?' implies 'you don't see the quiet sign (you're not being quiet)'; the remaining yes-no questions in turn imply 'children, you are not listening', 'you didn't hear the bell', and 'you don't remember [that the bell ringing means 'group work']'. Yet, in all cases, Mrs Zand does not explicitly pinpoint any negative behavior on the part of her students, nor does she pinpoint or single out any one student. This strategy helps to create a sense of fluidity and harmony within the group as well as in the classroom as a whole. Moreover, it contributes to a culture of equality, of oneness, among all 20 boys in the class. It simultaneously reflects a culture in which the teacher, as symbol of absolute authority, must be obeyed, with the necessity of obedience and compliance often only tacitly established.

Tags

A pervasive discourse-elicitation strategy used by Mrs Zand is the declarative statement + tag particle construction. Like the yes-no questions discussed above, all tag constructions in these data are designed to elicit an affirmative response. Mrs Zand appeals to this structure to introduce a new topic, to initiate a new activity, to stress a point, and to call the students' attention to a physical object in the classroom. The tag construction serves as an attention-getting and -holding device, and it unfailingly elicits choral response by the class. The two tag markers that Mrs Zand employs are *doroste?* 'right?' and *baleh?* 'yes?', to which the students invariably respond with a choral *baleh* 'yes', colored with a variety of intonational contours and volume ranges. Excerpt 2 illustrates a typical instance of this Initiation device:

Excerpt 2 ((Mrs Zand is collecting the students' class work, which consists of handouts on the letter *fe*.)

- 1 **T:** *kho[^]b* (.) *in ba[^]rge haatoono be[^] man be[^]di::n. aa[^]farin. alaa:[^]n,*
 2 *aamaadeim be[^]bini:[^]m i[^]n dafe che:[^], ka[^]lame haayi daakhele ketaabe*
 3 *maa:[^], boo[^]deh. doroste:[^]!*
 'Ok, give me these handouts of yours. Excellent. Now we're ready to see what words are in our book this time. Right?'
 4 **C:** *ba::[^]leh.*
 'Yes'.

In lines 1–3, Mrs Zand produces a multi-unit turn that reflects multiple speaker actions and two classroom-based activities: [action] → transition to new activity, signaled by *khob* 'good/okay'; [action/activity] → initiate new activity (i.e. collecting handouts), signaled by the directive; [action] → positively assess students' compliant behavior (*aafarin* 'excellent'); [action/activity] move to a new activity (i.e. working with the words in the textbook); and finally, [action] → seek confirmation through the tag particle *doroste* 'right?'. The students' single-word response in line 4, *ba::[^]leh* 'yes', is uttered in near-perfect unison, with a rise-fall intonation and extended stress on the first syllable that reflects the boys' understanding of and orientation toward this routine. They are perfectly familiar with this discursive routine of 'tag + choral *baleh*'. Through this routine, both the teacher and students demonstrate their mutual orientation to the necessity of full attention to the teacher's direction as well as that of an immediate collective verbal acknowledgement – an orientation that relies entirely on indirection and inference. The teacher has established a clear set of expectations concerning appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the classroom, and the boys comply, all together as a unit.

Wh-questions

Choral reply by the students in this class is also plainly visible in wh-question-response sequences. The wh-question is Mrs Zand's only resource for explicitly querying content- and context-based information. That is, it is her primary resource for eliciting the boys' understanding displays in relation to both the textbook content and the classroom procedures particular to that context. However, in addition to querying knowledge and understanding, Mrs Zand's wh-question routines function implicitly to socialise the boys into the values of harmony and equality on the one hand, and tacit obedience to authority on the other.

Mrs Zand's Initiation turns that are built around wh-questions are typically designed to elicit a specific response type, i.e. a single-word answer, in a variety of fashions: choral response by the entire class, small-group response, and individual response. Excerpt 3 illustrates a wh-question responded to by the entire class:

Excerpt 3 ((The teacher is demonstrating on the blackboard how to write the letter *fe*, stressing the shape that it takes in word-final position.))

- 1 **T:** *haa^laa ba^chehaa, yeki az chi^zaayi ke too roo^ze barfi mi^aad*
 2 *ke esme on rooz mishah rooze ba^rfi chi^e?*
 ((gesturing snow falling from the sky))
 ‘Now children, one of the things that comes on a snowy day
 and actually that’s why we call it a snowy day, is what?’
 3 **C:** *BA^RF!*
 ‘SNOW!’

The teacher’s question is a simple one: ‘What comes (i.e. falls) on a snowy day?’, and the answer could easily be ‘snow’. However, her question turn is not delivered quite so simply. In fact, it is extremely complex from the point of view of syntax, lexical choice, prosodic coloring, and gestures, all of which work together as incremental hints to underscore and elicit the preferred response.

The actual question delivery is prefaced dually by the transition marker *haalaa* ‘now’ and the vocative *bachehaa* ‘children’, serving to first attract and hold the boys’ attention and then to designate who the expected respondent(s) would be, i.e. the entire class. That is, the true question words, *chi e* ‘is what?’, are delayed until the very end of the turn. All of the talk leading up to *chi e* ‘is what?’ is designed to pinpoint precisely and without an ounce of variation what it is that Mrs Zand is looking for as a correct reply.

We find that the lexical answer to her question is contained in both relative clauses that lead to the ‘what’ content. In the first relative clause, Mrs Zand mentions *roo^ze barfi* ‘snowy day’, with prominence placed on the noun *rooz* ‘day’ (snowy day). She then immediately reformulates her utterance mid-turn and produces a second relative clause, now further emphasising the target word through the content of the clause *esme* ‘name’ as well as by repeating the noun phrase with reversed prosodic prominence, i.e. on the word *barfi* ‘snowy’ *rooze ba^rfi* ‘snowy day’. Concomitant with this elaborately designed turn are her gestures of snow falling down from the sky.

In line 3, the students chorally respond loudly and eagerly, in perfect unison: *BA^RF!* ‘SNOW!’. With all of the hints leading up to this question and the true question word appearing at the end of Mrs Zand’s query turn, the content and timing of the boys’ response are almost inevitable. Given the structure and design of this exchange, there is little room for guessing, and the likelihood that students would provide a wrong answer or even respond out of turn is substantially reduced, if not zero.

The wh-questions throughout this entire data set are designed to isolate minute pieces of lexical/contextual information as well as choral, almost ritual, reply in which all students are expected to spontaneously produce the precise answer, without any hesitation, doubt, or waiver. This type of questioning also eliminates any chance of producing an individual or unique response by any of the students, such that one student stands out or is otherwise individuated through his own verbal or nonverbal behavior.

Who responds and how

As we have noted in the foregoing excerpts, Mrs Zand has created a classroom culture of seeming equality, unity, and oneness. A choral Response turn by the students is the unmarked, preferred manner of providing answers to her questions. These turns are simple and neat. Moreover, they are impeccably timed and predictable: the answer to a yes-no question is always ‘yes’, the answer to a tag is always ‘yes’, the answer to a wh-question

will be made transparently obvious through multiple hints, even though no hint may be necessary at all. There is little room, if any, for an incorrect response, and through routine, repetition, and constant practice, the underlying expectation is that all responses are to be immediate.

With regard to speakership, Mrs Zand designates the entire class by default: a yes-no question, tag, or wh-question delivered with no student specified as an addressee is responded to by the class as a whole, in unison. If an individual is called upon, the directive for the student to respond is done by pointing, as in Excerpt 1, where the teacher gesturally designates Giv as the next speaker, or by the use of vocative expressions such as *shomaa pesare golam* ‘you (fml.), my flower son/boy’, or both. In addition to whole-class- and individual student-based responses, the teacher will also designate small groups to respond to her questions and directives.

In all cases, by virtue of the teacher’s Initiation turn design, responses are expected to be simple, predictable, equal, and fair. No one student should stand out from the rest, in terms of length of turn or inventiveness. Excerpts 4 and 5 illustrate this.

In Excerpt 4, the students are working in groups of 3–4 boys. The teacher’s multi-unit turn at lines 1–3 contains an array of directives, seeming to center on the activity of *mashvarat* ‘discussion’. In actuality, however, the target directive involves nothing more than responding to a wh-question, the answer to which is, again, simple and transparent:

Excerpt 4 ((Each long row of 10 boys has been divided into groups of three to four, with the groups having formed as a result of Mrs Zand ringing her bell. The boys have been working with snow pictures and handouts on the letter *fē*.)

- 1 **T:** ... *haa^laa mikhaam ma^shvarat ko^nin.*
 2 *ma^shvarat konin sedaatoono on ye^ki gorooh na^shnave.*
 3 *dar che^ fasli: ba^rf mi^baare? ma^shvara:^t. mashvara:^t.*
 ‘Now I want you to have a discussion. Discuss it in a way
 that the other group can’t hear your voice.
 In what season does it snow? Discuss. Discuss’.
 (2.0)
 ((the boys are huddling in their groups, boys’ arms around each others’
 shoulders))
- 4 **T:** *go^roohe sho^maa:^!*
 ‘Your group?’
- 5 **G1:** *ZE^ME[STAAAN.* ((teacher points to this group))
- 6 **G2:** *[ZEMEST[AAN* ((teacher points to this group))
- 7 **G3:** *[ZE^MESTAAN* ((teacher points to this group))
- 8 **T:** *aa^farin. fa^sle:!*
 ‘Excellent. (The) season (is)?’
- 9 **C:** *ze^mestaan.*
 ‘Winter’.

Mrs Zand delays the production of her wh-question (‘In what season does it snow?’) by first providing instruction on *how* she wants it to be answered, i.e. ‘so that others can’t hear’. This creates a sense of motivation and pseudo-competition, as we note the boys huddling close to each other to assure the secretiveness of their responses. Following this comes her question, to which she immediately appends the directive, ‘Discuss. Discuss’, thereby further delaying a response by the boys and assuring that no one student will just blurt out the answer. What the teacher is doing is controlling the way in which the single word *zemestaan* ‘winter’ needs to be uttered.

Students break into a huddle and whisper to each other, as if performing a ritual. Mrs Zand then points to each group and elicits the response, one group at a time. Once again,

all boys in all groups have the same answer, *zemestaan* ‘winter’. Group 1 is designated first with Mrs Zand’s pointer. The response is loud and enthusiastic, followed immediately and in overlap by a loud and enthusiastic response by Group 2, which in turn, is followed by an equally loud and enthusiastic overlapping response by Group 3, as if sections of an orchestra responding to a conductor. Following this rhythmic and animated interaction, Mrs Zand provides an Evaluation move *aafarin* ‘excellent’ and then opens the floor to the full class, isolating only the noun as the form of her wh-question: *fasle* ‘(which) season?’. All boys respond chorally yet mechanically this time, indicating their shift from pseudo-competition as members of a small group with a mission to monotone ritual as part of a whole-class recitation activity, as noted by the unmarked delivery of the word *zemestaan* in line 9.

Throughout this interaction, we observe how the sense of harmony and community is created and maintained. In spite of what appears to be a competition among groups to come up with the right answer, and secretly, so that no one else can hear, the boys all enthusiastically produce the same word. No one is ostensibly better, brighter, smarter, or quicker than the other – the entire interaction of which is so intricately choreographed and controlled by the teacher.

Excerpts 1–4 exemplify the overwhelming majority of the boys’ responses. As we have observed, they are homogenous, controlled for both content and length, and orchestrated implicitly through the interaction as it unfolds.

Excerpt 5 presents an example of discourse in which one student, Reza, who is designated to speak, produces a creative response, and one that is longer than what the teacher expected or wanted:

Excerpt 5 ((Mrs Zand has rung the bell, signaling group work. The boys are now in their groups.))

- 1 **T:** *...cha^nd taa jomle dar morede i:^n chizi ke mi^binin*
 2 *mikhaam be^saazin.*
 ‘I want you to make a few sentences about this thing that you see’.
 ((Students are talking in their groups))
- 3 **T:** *kaa:^fie. ((ringing the bell)) aa^y aa^y aa^y.*
 4 *sedaaye zang oo^mad. kho^b (.) sho^maa pesare golam*
 5 *che no daa:^staani che::^ ehh jomleyi mitooni baa*
 6 *in be^saazi? Be^saaz. =*
 ‘That’s enough. Ok, ok, the bell rang (lit. the sound of bell came).
 Ok, you, my flower son ((pointing to Reza)), what kind of story,
 what sentence can you make with this? Make one’.
- 7 **Reza:** = *pe^dareshoon baa ba^chehaashoon* (lit. ‘their father,’ syntactic error
 8 by child speaker) *(.) ehh tasmim gereftan (.) be^ran (.) ye^jaaye barfi::[:],*
 ‘Their father, with their children, decided to go to a snow::y place’,
- 9 **T:** *[ye^k jomle besaaz pe^sare golam. = fa^ghat*
 10 *ye^k jomle. yek jomle ba^raamoon be^saaz be:^binim.*
 ‘One sentence my flower son. Only one sentence.
 Make one sentence for us so that we can see (you can do it)’.
 (1.0)
- 11 **T:** *masalan dar morede in pesar.*
 ‘For instance, about this boy’.
- 12 **Reza:** *I^n pesar ki:^f daarad. =*
 ‘This boy has a bag’.
- 13 **T:** = *ta^moom shod. khe^ili aalie. ye daste mo^hkam baraash bezanin.*
 ‘That’s it. Very good. Give him a loud (strong) applause’.
 ((class applauds))

Here, Mrs Zand launches an IRF sequence at line 6 as she designates a student in one of the groups to invent a sentence about the snowy day scene in their textbook. The teacher's instruction is somewhat ambiguous with respect to what the boys are actually expected to do. That is, it is not clear whether students are supposed to compose 'a few sentences' about the scene, individually or collaboratively, or for one student to compose a complete sentence on his own.

Reza is designated by the teacher using the vocative term of endearment *pesare golam* 'my flower son/boy'. In line 7, he attempts to utter what appears to be the beginning of a narrative, introduced by a rather awkward sentential subject NP, *pedareshoon baa bache haashoon* 'their father, with their children', as the relevant background information about the characters and then he continues to add to his story. As Reza completes this first clause (a 10-word turn), prosodically marked with a sound stretch and rising intonation as a signal of more to come, Mrs Zand stops him. Both the story line and the accompanying syntax have become far too complex for the task.

In lines 9 and 10, Mrs Zand re-states her directive by specifying three consecutive times that Reza should make *only one* sentence, and provides a hint that it should begin with the subject *in pesar*, 'this boy . . .', resembling the sentence structure and content that appear in their book. Reza produces a simple sentence *in pesar kif daarad* 'this boy has a bag', to which Mrs Zand immediately latches another multi-unit turn, serving at once as a directive for Reza to cease his composing aloud, *tamoom shod* 'that's it' (lit. 'it's over'), as an assessment of a job well done (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992), and finally as a bid to the remainder of the class to collectively praise Reza's work. Mrs Zand has taken a potentially face-threatening performance on the part of one of her boys and collaboratively assisted him to recover. Reza's repair turn at line 12 now takes the shape of a simple, predictable utterance within the context of this classroom, which then receives collective praise from the entire class. The student who once stood out now fades back into the group by performing in a predictable manner and by receiving applause and praise by his classmates, and once again, this quality of interaction is controlled ever so strongly, yet barely perceptibly, by Mrs Zand.

Evaluation: collective praise, harmony, and brotherhood

When an Evaluation turn or sequence of turns is produced by the teacher, it is typically used at the opening of the session or a new activity in the lesson as a means of setting a positive initiating tone, or to direct students' attention away from an incorrect response or otherwise unacceptable type of behavior. Excerpt 6 illustrates Mrs Zand's use of a complex Evaluation sequence to accomplish both goals: opening the class session on a positive note and calibrating one student's behavior. The excerpt begins with the class having just sung their opening song and completed the ritual exchange of greetings between the teacher and student. The teacher is now circulating around the room to collect the homework from the night before. Students were asked to make a snowy day 3D picture. The positive evaluative terms are highlighted in bold; directives designating singular and plural second-person addressees are indicated with a single underline:

Excerpt 6 Evaluation sequence to open the class session ((1.5 minutes into the beginning of the class, Mrs Zand is collecting the homework, one by one, as she walks around the room.)) p. 1.

1 **T:** *che gha[^]shang saakhte in doostemoo:[^]n. khob man gofte boodam*
2 *baa pa[^]nbe:: eh[^] fa[^]sle ze[^]mestaan ro: yaa inke yek kaar dastie*

- 3 *khoo[^]b ro baraaye ma:[^]n na[^]maayesh bedin.*
 ((praising the students as she collects their assignments)).
- 4 *khei[^]li aalie.*
- 5 *aa[^]farin pesare golam (.) khe[^]ili khoob bood. A[^]hsant.*
 ‘**What a beautiful job** this friend of ours has done. Ok, I told you to demonstrate for me the winter season using cotton or other good craft materials ((praising the students as she collects their assignments)) **It’s great. Well done my flower son/boy. That was very good. Excellent’.**
 (1.0)
- 6 T: *kho[^]b.* ((pause: students still handing in assignments, one by one))
- 7 *besiaa[^]r khoob. aa[^]farin. khei[^]li ghashang shode.*
- 8 *che ghad ma[^]nzare haaye khoobi. = ba[^]che haa bazi az*
- 9 *doo[^]staatoon az chizaaye mo[^]khtalef estefaade kardan. = ne:[^]gaah*
- 10 *bokoni:[^]n. (1.0) Ali didi:[^]? Negah konin (.) ba[^]ziaa faghat*
- 11 *az pa:[^]nbe estefaade kardan baziaa az chizaaye mo:[^]khtalef*
- 12 *estefaade kardan. (0.2) injaa to ke[^]laas gofti:[^]m az ha:[^]r*
- 13 *vasileyi mi[^]toonin estefaade konin. (0.6)*
- 14 *khe[^]ili aali bood aaghaa Peyman.*
 ‘Ok ((pause)). **Very good. Great job. How nicely they (your projects) have come out.** These scenes are excellent. Children, some of your friends have used different materials. Look (pl.). Ali, did you (s. inf.) see? Look (pl.). Some have only used cotton balls and some have used different things. (0.2) Here, in class we said you can use any material. **That was very good Mr Peyman.**

The evaluation sequence is a richly layered series of praises by Mrs Zand for the accomplishments of her young students. The praise is delivered in a two-pronged manner, whereby the positive evaluative terms comment on not only the apparent quality of the work but also the fact that the students have followed the directions, essentially, ‘I told you to do x and you did it’.

Within this excerpt, we find that one student, Ali, is not paying attention. He is fidgeting and unfocused. In line 10, note the teacher’s use of her yes-no question inserted into this exchange as a means of gaining Ali’s attention. The teacher’s use of a yes-no question at this very point in her assessment sequence (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992) underscores just to what degree the construction serves as an attention highlighter.

As we observed earlier in Excerpt 1, negative behavior that is exhibited by an individual student, e.g. not paying attention and/or not focusing on the activity at hand, is not explicitly sanctioned by Mrs Zand. Despite the lack of explicitness in the teacher’s intent, the message is all too clear.

Although the teacher seems to single out one individual student with her question, *Ali, didi?* ‘Ali, did you see (them)?’, she is actually drawing all of the class members into this discourse of praise. In this way, she invites Ali, and the class by extension, to praise and be praised for the work they have all done as a group, though silently. Through this type of verbal exchange, students are being socialised simultaneously into the values of doing good work and of recognising the good work of others. She concludes the praising segment by singling out another student, Peyman, referred to here by Mrs Zand as ‘Mr Peyman’, with the title *aaghaa* serving to upgrade the compliment all the more as a term of respect.

The teacher: imparter of knowledge, model of Islamic culture, creator of the collective good

The creation of this collective environment of cooperation and the establishment of the types of interpersonal bonds we observe in this classroom are enhanced by other instances

of Mrs Zand's discursive style beyond her systematic use of IRF/IRE devices for practicing and demonstrating knowledge and conduct.

She opens the class with a ritual song that the boys sing in perfect unison, *benaameh aanke baashad mehrabaantar zeh baabaa vaa zeh maadar* 'in the name of the One who is kinder than father and mother'. The reference points to the Islamic belief that God is *arhamar rahemeen*, 'the most Merciful of the Merciful', a kind, benevolent, and protecting God. The morphology of *mehrabaan-TAR* 'kind-ER' establishes a hierarchical comparison between God and parents, with God at the apex, followed by parents, who, by their very beings, are *mehrabaan* 'kind'. As we observe, Mrs Zand positions herself as an extension of this merciful God-parent-(and now)-teacher hierarchy, all representing spiritual and human symbols of authority and power that the boys are socialised to both respect and appreciate.

Throughout the interaction, Mrs Zand indexes herself as the central authority figure in the classroom, the primary holder of knowledge, the tester of that knowledge, and the evaluator of all student performance. At the same time, through her robust repertoire of vocatives and reference terms of endearment, she creates an atmosphere in the classroom whereby the boys are frequently referred to as her dear 'sons'/'boys' and 'flower sons/boys' as well as 'friends' of each other: she constructs herself as the image of the 'kind' and 'merciful' mother. The terms that appear with great frequency throughout the data are: *pesar* 'son/boy', *pesaram* 'my son/boy', *pesare golam* 'my flower son/boy', *aaghaaye golam* 'my flower gentleman', *doostam* 'my friend', *dooste man* 'friend of mine', *doostetoon* 'your (pl.) friend', *doostet* 'your (s.) friend'.

The teacher in this classroom is not only the authority over content, context, and conduct but also the benevolent mother and creator of unity – her 'flower sons/boys' do what they can to properly answer questions as well as to please this mother-teacher figure, to make her happy and proud. She establishes the classroom atmosphere in which all members are 'friends' of each other and 'sons' of the teacher. By metaphorical extension, they are also brothers.

Predicting each other's words: orientation to the *other*

Mrs Zand also creates social cohesion and obedience among her young students through a discursive strategy in which she verbalises aloud a set of thoughts that she imputes to her young students. In so doing, she overtly expresses issues of students' curiosity as well as her own expectations of conduct and comportment as if ventriloquating in real time and in situated contexts, the boys' thoughts, questions, and meta-understandings of the lessons. She appears to 'read the boys' minds' and imputes words and ideas as if they were actually uttered or imagined by her students. Excerpt 7 provides a series of such instances. Reference to ventriloquated collective second person addressees (e.g. *khodetoon* 'yourselves,' and *hamatoon* 'all of you') is indicated with double underline; agreement-seeking tag constructions are indicated with single underline.

Excerpt 7 ((Mrs Zand had entered the classroom about four minutes prior to this segment))

- 1 **T:** *haalaa hatman be khodetoon goftin cheraa khaanoom moallem in*
 2 *dafe goft baa panbe kaar bokonim. = doroste!*
 'Now you've **definitely** asked yourselves why did Mrs teacher
 tell us this time to use cotton balls. Right?'
 3 **C:** *Baleh*
 'Yes'.
 4 **T:** *khob age khoob deghat bokonin man emrooz baa khodam yechizi*

- 5 *aavordam. vaghti oomadam too kelaas hamatoon goftin ‘.hfff in chiie?’*
 6 *doroste!*
 ‘Ok, if you pay close attention, (you’ll see that) today I brought something
 ((she is referring to the ‘Snowy Day diorama’.) When I came to class you all
 said ‘.hhh what is this? Right?’
 ((14 lines skipped))
- 7 **T:** *man fek konam hamatoon montazerin ghabl az har kaari maa*
 8 ((she pauses as she picks up the bell)) *daste man mire tarafe zang*
 9 *shomaa baayad begin khaanoom kaare goroohi. = yaadetoone?*
 ‘I think you’re all waiting for us to – before doing anything else – when my
 hand goes towards the bell, you should say ‘Mrs, group work!
 Do you remember?’

Mrs Zand reflects herself not only as the authority and expert over the content material but also as an omniscient figure, able to predict the exact words and ideas the boys might be thinking. In all three excerpts, the purported direct discourse expressed by the teacher takes the form of a question (‘Why did Mrs Teacher ask us to use cotton balls?’ and ‘What is this?’) or an excited imperative (‘Mrs, Group work!’) to highlight the students’ curiosity (concerning the 3D assignment) or meta-understanding of classroom symbols and their connection with expected behaviors. That is, in lines 8 and 9, Mrs Zand reiterates the classroom ‘rule’ that her ringing of the bell represents an automatic and immediate nonverbal cue for students to form groups. The teacher has established the bell as a symbol of a classroom practice. The teacher’s ringing of the bell becomes synonymous with the initiation of specific activity-based behaviors. It is no longer the teacher, now, who is the authority figure, but the symbol. The boys are socialised to recognise the symbol as the initiator of a particular type of behavior for a particular purpose, and thus to obey the symbol when they see or hear it displayed. Mrs Zand makes it understood that no words are necessary – the sound of the bell expresses a sufficiently clear directive that the boys are now expected to understand and follow.

In Excerpt 8, we find a similar reference to a directive-imbued symbol. Here, instead of ventriloquating the actual words that the boys might have uttered in connection with the symbolic act (i.e. her hand moving toward the chalk), Mrs Zand simply refers to it. What is also noteworthy here is the fact that it is the *movement of Mrs Zand’s hand toward the chalk* that is the expected signal, and not the act itself of picking up or even touching the chalk. In other words, the boys are supposed to *predict* their required behavior on the basis of a hint, i.e., *incipient motion*, rather than the completed action:

Excerpt 8 ((The teacher is shifting activities from reading handouts and discussing the snowy day topic to working with the writing textbook, *benevisim* ‘Let’s Write’))

- 1 **T:** *ye^ kho^ shgel beshin man too ke^ laa:s, mikhaam be^ binam*
 2 *pe^ saraaye zerangam ki^ a:n? pe^ saraayi ke baa:^ hooshan.*
 3 *be^ bini^ n man vaghti beram tarafe ga^ ch, shomaa zoo^ d*
 4 *be^ doonin baaya^ d che^ ke^ taabi roo mi^ z baashe:!*
 ‘Sit nicely in class. I want to see who my smart son is. Boys who are
 intelligent. Tell me, when I go towards the chalk you should know right away
 which book should be on the desk?’
- 5 **C:** *be^ nevisi:^ m.*
 ‘Let’s Write’.

The expectation for members of a society to predict the needs and thoughts of others and to read symbolic hints as substitutes for explicit verbal direction has been pointed out

by Gudykunst, Stewart, and Ting-Toomey (1985) and Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) as essential components of more collectivistic sociocultural groups.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study has provided an important glimpse into the literacy and socialisation practices of one first-grade classroom in Tehran, Iran. The culture-specific practices of these early-school activities have revealed a number of symbols of absolute authority: *khodaa* ‘God’ (*benaaameh khodaayeh mehrabaan* ‘in the name of kind God’), the teacher, the textbook, and specific classroom artifacts intended to regulate behavior (bell, chalk, signs posted around the room). It is the first-grade teacher in Iran who is individually responsible for children’s initiation into the iconic aspects of literacy – the realm of reading and writing and the many worlds of letters, shapes, stories, and literatures that open up to them as a result.

The final excerpt, Excerpt 9, represents the full translated text of the last lesson of the first-grade reader. It is written and delivered as a demonstration of gratitude by the students for their teacher:

Excerpt 9 – The last day: *darseh aakhar* ((The last lesson of *bekhaanim* ‘Let’s Read’))

God! Oh, you kind God, we thank you for having given us the ability to learn how to read and write. God! We thank you for having taught us to learn good and new things. We are grateful to our good teacher who taught us how to read and write. We thank our dedicated parents who have worked hard in raising us. God! Today we are studying the last lesson of the textbook and we are very happy that we can read sweet stories and educational books. God! We are going to the second grade next year. Help us to study better next year than we did this year.

This final textbook lesson is a collective expression of thanks, an expression that once again voices the purported emotions of all students who have just completed this first academic year with their teacher. The students’ recognition of *khodaa* (‘God’), the teacher’s work, and their concomitant cooperative voicing of gratitude is at once relevant, expected, and proper. Note that this text expresses the students’ emotions and respect not only for their teacher but also for the other authority figures in the children’s lives, i.e. God and their parents, all of whom need to be loved and respected.

Throughout the textbook lesson on the letter *fē*, we observe with minute precision how it is that the teacher discursively frames herself as absolute authority within her interactions with the students. We also observe how the values of equality, harmony, and respect for the collective good are discursively created and maintained through verbal and nonverbal communication. Crucially, through the routinised practices of closed question-answer and directive-response sequences, delicately interspersed with seemingly open reply spaces, the 20 boys in this classroom not only learn how to read, write, and pronounce words with the target letters but also tacitly learn what is expected of them from the multiple points of view of the timing, accuracy, and predictability of their responses. The content, *ta’lim*, is thus inextricably interwoven into the values of nurturing and proper comportment, *tarbiyyat*. That is, in addition to book learning, the students attend to implicitly delivered messages of obedience, conformity, intellectual equality, and bonds of brotherhood. Shorish indicates that *tarbiyyat* is more than training: ‘it is the acquisition of desirable attitudes and characteristics’ (1988, p. 61).

What we find built into this IRF/IRE structure of classroom interaction is a subtle, yet powerful dynamics that interweave the teaching and learning of the iconic aspects of literacy with the underlying values of the larger culture. Through the interactional routines

of yes-no questions, tags, and wh- questions, these boys are being socialised into a range of implicit values that esteem obedience, correctness, respect for authority, and the need for conformity, while disesteeming incorrectness, disobedience, and nonconformity. The Initiation and Evaluation moves serve to construct all class members as intellectually equal; everyone knows and is able to produce ‘correct’ answers. All members know how to behave appropriately, and when an individual strays, he is reminded in a gentle and subtle way such that the improper behavior does not stand out noticeably to the group.

Through both active and passive participation in these classroom activities, the boys gain an incipient understanding of the high value that is placed on literacy in their country. Additionally, and perhaps even more importantly, they gain an incipient understanding of what constitutes appropriate ways of learning, of speaking (to the teacher and to their peers), of listening, of treating others, and of representing themselves in a public, institutional context.

The study of early literacy events, in general, reveals much about the culture within which they take place – home and family, the institution of school (public/private), the institution of religion, state and local institutions, and the nation, most broadly.

This study has uncovered critical links among the institutional setting of a government-controlled Islam-based school, the classroom design and décor, the textbook, the micro-level interactions among and between the teacher and her two students, and the larger values of sociopolitical and religious culture.

Notes

This article is dedicated to the memory of Bahram. He was a wonderful father and teacher. The authors are indebted to him for his insightful observations throughout the development of this project.

1. The Persian alphabet is a slightly modified version of the Arabic alphabet, with variations affecting both consonants and vowels; it also has 32 characters, as opposed to 28 in Arabic (Thackston, 2009, p. xvii).
2. For the purpose of our analysis, we use the term ‘brotherhood’ to mean ‘fellowship and a sharing of common value systems’, without any intended emphasis on gender. While the group being investigated here is a class of boys taught by a female teacher, we are not in a position to make gender-based claims without additional data.
3. The CD was given to the authors by a colleague who is a first-grade public school teacher in Tehran. The authors had been working to arrange an onsite ethnographic study of early literacy events in Iran, which proved challenging. Our colleague provided the present video both as a current representation of an authentic first-grade classroom interaction and as an instance of public discourse.
4. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
5. All public activities in Iranian society open with a short blessing that minimally includes the words or idea of *benaameh khodaa* ‘in the name of God’ – films, television programs, sermons, speeches, and class meetings.
6. The Persian subject pronouns for second-person address are similar in function to French *tu* (singular informal [s. inf.]) and *vous* (singular deferential/formal and general plural [pl.]). In Persian, the singular informal second-person pronoun is *to* and the singular deferential/formal or general plural pronoun is *shomaa*. Different from French, however, is the fact that *shomaa* can also be inflected with the plural morpheme *haa* such that the pronoun *shomahaa* unequivocally designates a plural addressee.
7. The placement of a letter within a word may affect the actual shape that it takes in cursive Persian. Some letters have variant shapes in word-initial and word-final position. Word-medially, there are specific rules with regard to which letters should be connected to contiguous letters and which should not. These rules and variants are crucial to learning how to read and write. *Fe* is one such letter that is written differently in each of the three environments; phonetically, there is no variation in pronunciation that takes place due to the varying environments or surface form.

8. TCU is an acronym for 'turn constructional unit'. This concept, initially proposed by Sacks et al. (1974), refers to the smallest unit of talk-in-interaction that speakers use to build turns at talk. According to Sacks et al. (1974), a TCU can be a single word (i.e., a *lexical* TCU 'Politics'), a phrase (i.e., a *phrasal* TCU 'in the snow'), a clause (i.e., a *clausal* TCU 'because we were late'), or a full sentence (i.e., a *sentential* TCU 'It's insecurity, not confidence, that drives her'). A conversational turn can be composed of a single TCU (as is the predominant turn type in students' talk from these data) or multiple TCUs, with strings of individual units forming a single turn, as seen in Mrs Zand's talk.

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Appendix. Transcription conventions

Symbol	Realization within data	Meaning
^	<i>roo[^]ze barfi</i> ‘snowy day’	Prosodic prominence, emphasis, stress
upper case	<i>ZEMESTAAN</i> ‘winter’	Increased volume
:	<i>mo:naase::b</i> ‘appropriate’	Sound stretch
.	<i>benevisim</i> ‘Let’s Write’	Falling, final intonation
,	<i>ki:f</i> ‘bag’	Listing intonation
?	slight rising intonation.	
?	<i>doroste</i> ‘right?’	Full rising intonation.
(.)	<i>khob</i> (.) ‘good’	Untimed pause
(1.0)		Timed pause (in seconds)
[<i>yejaaye barffi::</i> ‘a snowy place’	
	<i>[baleh</i> ‘yes’	Overlapping talk
	<i>yek jomle. . . = faghat yek jomle</i>	Latching
	‘one sentence, only one sentence’	