

Sculpting English Language Teaching Materials: A Narrative Self-Study of a Practicing Materials Developer

Seyyede Fahimeh Parsaiyan*¹
Sue-san Ghahremani Ghajar²
Mahsa Sohrabi ³

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Abstract

The present qualitative study narrates the challenges and identity changes experienced by an Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher taking her initial steps in developing second language reading materials through recreating the anecdotes of a Persian classic poet. Her descriptive and analytic field notes while designing the materials, feedbacks received from two advisors and six language teachers, and various drafts of the developed materials as documents formed the data for this self-study. Meticulous analysis of the data revealed the ways by which the practicing

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, (Corresponding Author); f.parsa@alzahra.ac.ir

² Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University; s.ghahremani@alzahra.ac.ir

³ M.A. in TEFL, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University; Mahsasohrabi0076@gmail.com

materials developer revisited a number of normative assumptions which had permeated her cognition; started to see materials development as art; and practiced self-reliance, creativity, respect, and ownership. Given the paucity of narrative enquiries focusing on materials developers' identity (re)-construction, the present study is hoped to provide a richer understanding of the processes involved in generating classroom materials.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Identity (Re)-construction, Materials Development, Narrative Enquiry, Self-study.

Introduction

Over the past three decades or so, narrative enquiry has gained increased visibility and legitimacy in the field of applied linguistics research, standing out as a potential tool for disseminating the formerly-unheeded stories of those involved in language teaching and learning (Barkhuizen, 2013; Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Mendieta & Barkhuizen, 2019; Nunan & Choi, 2010; Pavlenko, 2007; Tsui, 2007; Yazan, 2019). Despite a long call and a fairly large bulk of studies focusing on language learners', teachers', teacher educators', and, to a lesser degree, researchers' narratives, there are comparatively fewer enquiries depicting the challenges and changes experienced by beginner teacher-materials developers experiencing their foray into developing their own classroom materials (Bouckaert, 2017& 2019; Brandão, 2018). In other words, the journey experienced by novice materials developers has not been duly explored, written about or animated and their "private realities" including their cognition and emotions have not been "brought into the public sphere" (Johnson & Golombek, 2011, p. 490). The majority of the scholarly books and publications on materials development either focus on evaluating and analyzing existing materials or "are 'how to' books, with advice for teachers" (Garton & Graves, 2014, p. 655). The studies concerned with local, "home-made" or "in-house" teacher-generated materials also chiefly concentrate on the process of developing the materials and their impacts (Al-Busaidi & Tindle, 2010; Johnson, 2003; Timmis, 2014) and hence focus less on the lived experiences of the materials designers and "the interplay between...teachers' experiences of...designing and implementing their own materials and their identity (re)construction" (Brandão, 2018, p. 254). Similarly, Bouckaert (2017, p. 11) argues that "although continuing professional development has been identified as one of its benefits, ... the concrete effects of the creation of classroom materials on the teacher have remained largely under-researched". Acknowledging the existing gap, Wyatt (2011, p. 4) also asserts that "there is a lack of longitudinal research into the processes through which expertise in materials design develops."

The ways by which teachers design classroom materials seem significant not only because they unveil how teachers think, plan, and act as designers, but also how such undertakings raise their reflections about what and how to teach (Augusto-Navarro, 2015; Bouckaert, 2019, Johnson, 2003; Kerr, 1981). In other words, "developing materials gives teachers the possibility to reflect, innovate,

create better teaching and learning settings, grow as individuals and professionals” (Núñez & Téllez, 2015, p. 58); strengthen “their sense of ownership and agency” (Bouckaert, 2019, p. 4); and experience more career satisfaction (Shawer, 2010).

In an era in which reliance on ready-made, “routine, run-of-the-mill materials” (Maley & Kiss, 2018, p. 227) or following them “as scripts” (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018, p. 29) is highly discouraged and language teachers, now considered as reflective practitioners, are recommended to build confidence in generating their own socio-culturally relevant contents and learning activities or even fancy themselves as coursebook writers (Block, 1991; Connelly & Graves, 1988; Jolly & Bolitho, 2011; McGrath, 2013; Shawer, 2010; Tomlinson, 2013), the paucity of these real-life narratives could vividly be felt.

Building on this purpose, in this article, an Iranian Master’s degree graduate of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) narrates her lived experiences of designing reading materials targeted at adolescent English learners at pre-intermediate level of proficiency, based on the anecdotes of a renowned Persian classic poet, Sa’di¹ (1210-1290 AD). The challenges and changes experienced by the language teacher in her initial practice of becoming a materials designer have been explored in this enquiry. It is proposed that the challenges of recreating the anecdotes as reading materials, designing cognitively-engaging activities, and self-creating visuals, as experienced by the teacher throughout her year-long journey of coming to be a materials developer, made her refine a number of normative assumptions which had intensely permeated her cognition. Such challenges made her practice self-reliance, creativity, respect, and ownership.

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Over the past three decades, applied linguistics research, similar to many other academic disciplines, has experienced a narrative turn; an enquiry area in which individuals’ stories are valued as “research data” and “storytelling” is acknowledged “as a tool for data analysis or presentation of findings” (Barkhuizen, et al., 2014, p. 3). As argued, “the main strength of narrative enquiry lies in its focus on how people use stories to make sense of their experiences in areas of enquiry where it is important to understand phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them” (Barkhuizen, et al., 2014, p. 2). Since then, various strands of narrative research have been constituted deploying (auto)biographical reflective narratives (Nunan & Choi, 2010), visual, multimodal narratives (Brandão, 2018), critical (auto)ethnographic narratives (Yazan, 2019), and more recently duoethnography (Rose & Montakantiwong, 2018).

¹ Shaikh Muslihu-D-Di Sa’di Shirazi is one of the celebrated Iranian poets of the medieval period (thirteenth-century AD) whose two classic literary works, *Rose Garden* and *Orchard*, enjoy worldwide fame and recognition and have left tremendous impact on Persian and non-Persian writers.

Besides language learning narratives, investigating ELT teachers' personal and professional lives through narrative enquiry has been the focus of numerous studies (Canagarajah, 2012; Leigh, 2019; Mendieta & Barkhuizen, 2019; Nunan & Choi, 2010; Parsaiyan et al., 2016; Pavlenko, 2007; Rose & Montakantiwong, 2018; Tsui, 2007; Yazan, 2019). Tsui's (2007) exploration of identity formation of a Chinese language teacher through collecting his narratives; Canagarajah's (2012) auto-ethnography of his "journey of professionalization" containing the struggles he had as a Sri Lankan periphery language teacher in developing multiple professional identities; Parsayian et al.'s (2016) study of epiphanies experienced by an Iranian English teacher and materials developer; Shelley et al.'s (2013) and Mendieta and Barkhuizen's (2019) investigation of the cognitive and emotional challenges narrated by language teachers in their changeover from conventional face-to-face teaching to distance and blended teaching contexts are empirical examples of this strand of enquiry.

Another strand of such narratives is drawn from second language teacher educators sharing the narratives of (re)-constructing new identities along with prospective, pre-service or in-service student teachers or mentees. More specifically, they narrate how through self and other examination and critical reflection, they moved themselves and their student-teachers towards more theoretically and pedagogically sound instructional practices and greater levels of professional expertise (Atai et al., 2017; Johnson & Golombek, 2013 & 2016; Park, 2014).

Besides teachers' and teacher educators' narratives, the identity construction of applied linguistics' researchers has been the focus of several studies (Norton & Early, 2011; Rahimi et al., 2019; Xu, 2014; Yuan, 2017); examples of which are Norton and Early's (2011) self-study of their researcher identity construction while making trips to some African regions for teaching digital literacy, and Rahimi et al.'s (2019) exploration of the driving forces which shaped the professional identity of a newly-recruited Iranian university instructor and two higher education students of applied linguistics.

Whereas many previous studies have focused on narratives of language teachers, teacher educators and, to a lesser degree, researchers, there are comparatively fewer studies focusing on language teachers' narratives of being and becoming materials developers.

Generally speaking, the literature on materials development chiefly focuses on a number of topics including the principles of materials development; frameworks for evaluating and analyzing materials, reports on textbooks' analyses and evaluations, particularly critical appraisals of globally-distributed commercial coursebooks; and practical tips for adapting, adopting or designing materials for different skills, levels, users, and purposes (Mishan & Timmis 2015; Tomlinson, 2011, 2013; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). With the heightened attention to the development of local materials and the role of ESL/EFL teachers as curriculum makers and materials developers, reports have also been published with respect to the impacts of "home-made" or teacher-generated materials (Al-Busaidi & Tindle, 2010; Troncoso, 2010). For instance,

Al-Busaidi and Tindle (2010) focused on evaluating the impact of in-house materials produced for improving writing skills of Arab university students at Sultan Qaboos University. They outlined their writing and evaluation process which staged from setting principled criteria for the development of the materials by the writing team, piloting the materials, and evaluating them retrospectively through soliciting teachers' and students' opinions and doing textual analysis on the students' writing scripts.

A much smaller share of publications belongs to reflective reports by materials writers themselves or from their perspectives on the process of writing materials and publishing them (Augusto-Navarro, 2015; Bouckaert, 2017; Hadfield, 2014; Jolly & Bolitho, 2011; Núñez & Téllez, 2015; Prowse, 2011, Timmis, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). In an oft-cited study, Prowse (2011) sought the perspectives of the writers of well-famed ELT coursebooks in 1994 and 15 years later. The writers shared their views with regard to the advantages and drawbacks of team-writing and pair-writing as well as their writing procedure which commonly included steps like setting course objectives, searching input materials from different sources, deciding about the nature and sequence of activities, revising the drafts based on the feedbacks received from publishers and making coordination with designers and editors; though in an unordered fashion. Timmis (2014), drawing upon one of his own collaborative materials writing experiences, also displayed how contradictions between the writing team and publishers, also called "intermediators", intervened the writing process and hence impacted the final product. In another self-report, Hadfield (2014) examined her own process of writing an academic resource book through documenting the "stages" and "sub-and-micro-processes" of generating ideas for activities, justifying their rationales, and writing instructions for each. Besides suggesting teachers' "tacit" knowledge in designing materials, she concludes that "textbook writing is a highly recursive and circuitous activity which cannot be reduced to a linear progression through checklists of concerns, but which demands flexibility and responsiveness to particular activities and contexts" (p. 320).

Close to the present enquiry, there are also process-oriented studies which focus on identity development or professional growth of ELT teachers while developing their own materials. For instance, Brandão (2018), using visual narrative enquiry, investigated the way a Brazilian pre-service EFL teacher collaborating on a project of designing classroom materials (re)-constructed her teaching identity. While in her initial visual drawings she depicted herself as an ineffective, "invisible" or "chaperone" teacher who relied heavily on ready-made pedagogical sources, she gradually gained more visibility through designing self-made classroom materials. However, given her lack of confidence and expertise, her early designed materials were not engagingly productive as she focused "too much on grammar rules and selected mechanical exercises from the Internet" (p. 263). Over time, as she practiced designing activities that demanded more cooperation of the students, she started to feel "like a present teacher" (p. 264). In another longitudinal qualitative research, Wyatt (2011) traced the development of an Omani English teacher's "practical knowledge in

materials design” over a three-year TESOL program. Through observing his classes and conducting interviews with him, Wyatt demonstrated that the teacher’s strong motivation, his prior and present experience in teaching young language learners, and the theoretical and practical trainings he had received during the program increased his confidence and autonomy in analyzing the coursebooks and their deficiencies, making justified and creative adaptations to the assigned materials, designing his own lessons, and helping his colleagues; though there were contextual and technical challenges that made him “dependent” at times.

In line with the preceding empirical research on teachers’ growth through materials development, the present study attempts to depict the interplay between teachers’ professional growth and developing materials through narrating the challenges and changes experienced by an Iranian language teacher in her initial practice of designing teaching materials; using “I” pronoun henceforth.

Methodology

Data Collection and Analysis

The present qualitative study, lasting over a year (from March 2018 to February 2019), could be considered a self-study narrative enquiry; a research methodology in which the researcher positioned as the inquirer “has a private vested interest in coming to understand the practice” (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p. 12) and hence attempts to deepen his/her understanding of the relationships and interactions with others “in the immediate present or in the reconstructed memory of interactions” (p.13). Pinnegar and Hamilton (p.105) mention “provocation, exploration, refinement, [and] identify focus” as components of self-study.

Taking a turn inward in this self-study, I, an Iranian female teacher in mid-twenties with over five years of teaching English at language institutes, got engaged in the practice of developing ELT materials for the first time in my life. To examine the procedure in depth, I used three sources of data collection, namely, field notes, dialogues with critical friends, and various drafts of the developing materials.

In my field notes, I chronicled in minute details descriptions of the occurring events, decisions made, and steps taken in each phase. Besides detailed descriptions, I kept records of my personal feelings and perspectives plus preliminary interpretation and analyses of the events. Such field notes exceeding over 50 pages enabled me to capture my own voice and my new understandings.

Furthermore, on frequent occasions I discussed my plans with my two ELT advisors and sent them various drafts of the materials. They wrote their comments in the margin of the files, made suggestions for improvement of the work, asked me to omit some parts, or rewrite it altogether. This happened for all the prepared materials (five anecdotes as a whole) and their activities and

visuals. Besides, upon the completion of the work, six conveniently selected language teachers (ranging from 25 to 30 in age, MA graduates or PhD candidates of TEFL, with four to eight years of teaching experience at English language institutes) were invited to appraise the designed materials and share their comments with regard to the contents, activities, and the visuals in an oral semi-structured interview. Six language learners (roughly at pre-intermediate level of English language proficiency), who were my former students, were also requested to self-study the materials and complete the activities.

In addition, since the practice demanded constant writing, revising, and editing, I kept copies of various drafts of the five recreated anecdotes and activities as documents of trajectory of change to my performance. Such drafts, together with my reflexive field notes, advisors' comments, teachers' interviews, and learners' responses, formed the data for the study.

Data analysis for this self-study was conducted recursively from the outset of the study with a desire to make sense of the unfolding events. Following Maxwell's (2013) guidelines for analyzing qualitative data, I started with immersing myself in the collected data by reading and re-reading my reflexive field notes, the oral and written comments I had received from my advisors, the teachers' interview transcriptions, students' responses, as well as my various drafts of designed materials. Coding and re-coding the data excerpts and constantly checking them with my advisors gradually led to emergence of a number of sub-themes with respect to changes experienced by me throughout this year-long journey. At the next stage, existing literature was re-consulted to interpret the findings and to compare them with those of other relevant studies. In the final stage, I was advised to use a chronicled narrative, precluded with a backstory, to aid readers audit the trail of decisions, rationales, and actions, on the one hand, and to demonstrate how the findings were reached, on the other hand. Besides thick description of the events, attempts were also made to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings through being involved in the practice for an extended period of time, triangulating different sources of data (reflexive field notes, dialogues with advisors, interviews, artefacts), taking a self-critical stance, and requesting the advisors to re-analyze the data and check the validity of the findings (Maxwell, 2013).

Procedure

Backstory

As a young English teacher, who ventured into the complicated field of ELT materials development, every single step that I took to design reading materials based on Persian classic literature was like walking in a long journey; a journey replete with rays of fright and courage; trepidation and relief; disappointment and hope. Experiencing all these ups and downs was such a turning point in my teaching life that had a great impact on my views, feelings, ideas, and knowledge. As a journeyer, I took record of the unfolding events, from the beginning to the end, as thoroughly as possible.

Prior to my acceptance to TEFL MA program in a state-run university, I had the experience of teaching English for four years at different private institutes. During these years, wherever I worked, I had to teach according to the institute's pre-determined curriculum and teach the materials designated by them. Sometimes, I felt like a robot in my classes whose duty was to follow the textbooks' contents, which I largely considered trivial and infantilizing. Moreover, as an Iranian Muslim teacher, the world depicted in the textbooks always made me feel alienated from our lived experiences, Iranian-Islamic lifestyle, beliefs, identity, and cultural heritage. Dissatisfied with the existing shortcomings in the mainstream materials, I felt intrigued to prepare and take home-grown materials instead of foreign products to my classes. However, obstacles like lack of pedagogically-appropriate materials and the fear of being rejected by the institutes' authorities disheartened me from taking the issue seriously. Above all, the idea of being a materials developer was almost beyond my wildest dreams at that time.

It was not until the third semester of MA program, as I was taking a Materials Development course that the idea reinvigorated once more. In that course, we read scholarly publications on materials developments, reviewed the views of critical analysts who criticize the commercially imported materials for their "inflexibility, shallowness, and lack of local relevance" (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018, p.3) as well as their carrying hidden curricula which promote and legitimize Western, capitalist, neoliberalist, materialistic, and individualistic values. We also vehemently discussed how creating locally-appropriate materials rooted in our Islamic-Iranian heritage could be significantly worthwhile in the Iranian context of English teaching.

Though options abounded, my prior familiarity as well as avid enthusiasm for Persian Literature, particularly classic one, and seeing its deep connections with Islamic-Iranian identity and culture inspired me to explore how classic Persian literary anecdotes could be recreated as reading materials for EFL classes; an issue which has comparatively received undue attention within the Iranian foreign language teaching context due to various reasons like the hegemony, supposed legitimacy, and salience of Native American and British literary products (Azizi, 2014; Kachru & Smith, 2008; Talib, 1992), and occasional scarcity of decent English translations of Persian literary works. To use Pinnegar and Hamilton's (2009) words, this was a "provocation" phase of this self-study in which "we recognize not only that we have interest but also that others have questions, taken opposing views, or have thought very little, if at all, about the idea that provokes us" (p.105).

The "provocation" was followed by an "exploration" phase (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009) during which I took time consulting existing literature on materials development (Mishan & Timmis 2015; Tomlinson 2011, 2013), designing home-made materials (Jolly & Bolitho, 2011); applications of literature in language teaching (Amer, 2003; Domínguez Romero et al., 2019; Hullah, 2018; Van, 2009), non-native literature (Kachru, 1999), as well as argumentative and research-based studies on using translated local and national literature in EFL

classes as language teaching materials (Boroomand et al., 2014; Florentino, 2014; Mohideen & Mohideen, 2009; Parsaiyan, et al., 2015; Raquitico, 2014; Safari, 2019; Vethamani, 1996).

It was when I felt a “refinement” and “identity focus” occurring in which I started to “bring together background and experience to decide what is worthy of study” and “consider how this study might contribute to our own work, to the work of others, and to the larger research literature” (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p.105). Under the tutelage of such backdrop and inspired by a couple of studies on using Persian literature as materials for language classes, I took on a journey for recreating Persian classic literature as reading materials, targeted at Iranian adolescent EFL learners at pre-intermediate level of English language proficiency. My objective was to aid language learners experience reading Persian stories in English in an amusing way and make connections between them and their own current lives. This was preceded by consulting experts for choosing the classic poet whose works could be taken to language classes, selecting a number of anecdotes based on a number of criteria, and juxtaposing different English translations of the selected anecdotes for further acquaintance with how the texts had been rendered into English. The most challenging stage was recreating the selected anecdotes as synoptic stories, designing meaningful activities for each, and designing illustrations and layouts. Not unlike any other immature performer, there were worries in the outset of the journey which made me hesitate. As an ordinary teacher, socialized into mainstream system of language education, and as the one with almost zero experience in developing classroom materials, it was so challenging to me to manage the process; part of such challenges will be narrated in the next part via employing *sculpting* metaphors. As suggested by Bouckaert (2019, p. 10), “teachers-as-materials-developers could resort to the use of imagery, like similes and metaphors” as they “can offer insights into teachers’ perceptions of their profession, their materials, and the principles underpinning their teaching practice”.

Selecting the Sculpting Clay

Creation has always been a charming word to me. Ever since I was a child, the idea of creating things with my own hands has been with me. I was about seven when I started to learn sculpting. To make a clay sculpture, I commonly went through a number of stages including choosing the original object to sculpt or making sketches of it; preparing tools including the most suitable clay and modeling tools; kneading, rolling, modeling, and trimming the material to create the desired shape; baking the sculpture or allowing it to dry; and eventually painting and decorating the sculpture. Throughout this journey, as I was engaged in designing classroom materials out of Persian classic literature, I could draw analogies between the *art* of materials development and the art of sculpting as I went through fairly similar stages.

Quite like choosing the original object, I started with choosing a proper Persian classic literary work. I made a list of some popular works, including *Book of*

the Marzban by Sa'ad ad-Din Varavini, *Mirror of Princes* by Keikavus and *The Rose Garden* by Sa'di Shirazi, and ran through them. Upon consulting a Persian Literature specialist, I eventually selected *The Rose Garden*; a renowned collection of short yet thought-provoking metrically and non-metrically-structured anecdotes written in 1258 CE. The collection has long been cherished in all parts of the Muslim and non-Muslim world for its literary elegance, satirical language, delicate and entertaining spiritual maxims, ethical teachings, and practical wisdom (Alavi, 2010; Zolfaghari & Panbezari, 2012).

I commenced a new process of going through the whole book; page by page, anecdote by anecdote. While reading each anecdote, I took time musing over its potentials to be recreated as EFL materials. To select appropriate anecdotes, I took into consideration a number of criteria including attraction of the anecdotes or their appeal to adolescent learners; richness of the content of the anecdotes including their underlying themes; relevance to contemporary life issues; linguistic features of the anecdotes like deployments of certain lexical items and grammatical structures; the inherent potentials of the anecdotes to be expanded and rewritten through adding new settings, imaginary characters, linguistic elements, inter alia (Carter & Long, 1991).

As there are about 287 anecdotes in *The Rose Garden* of Sa'di, I had to act selectively choosing a few of them to be recreated. This was a challenging stage; as Gray (2005) states, if first language literature "is not prudently chosen, and the students are not familiar with it or the translation is not appropriate, using it could mean lost pedagogical opportunities" (p. 4). Bearing this in mind, I tried to prepare a list of anecdotes I had found worthy of consideration. Through various consultations with a Persian Literature expert and my ELT advisors, I eventually selected five anecdotes to be recreated. In the next stage, I compared the original text of the selected stories with their different English translations so as to have a general understanding of how different translators had gone through rendering the anecdotes. It was the time when I felt the sculpture base had been prepared waiting for me to practice my artistry.

Kneading, Modeling and Trimming the Material to Create the Desired Shape

While prior to the outset of the research, I assumed the work to be an easy one, I soon realized the challenges involved in recreating the anecdotes. Not being able to go much beyond the stories and their frameworks, my first drafts were more like "translated" or "simplified" versions of the original anecdotes; lacking senses of "creativity" or "artistry". This was particularly evident in my first attempts to recreate "Liberal Cypress" anecdote (*The Rose Garden*, Maxim 81). In this anecdote, someone asks a wise person about the reasons why among all other trees cypress is called liberal (azadeh). The wise man replies that "Every tree has its appropriate season of fruit, so that it is sometimes flourishing therewith, and looks sometimes withered by its absence; with the cypress, however, neither is the case, it being fresh at all times". He then adds that "and this is the quality of those who are free" (Rehatsek, 2010, p.226). I rationalized

that the meaningful content of the story (being liberal like the cypress) could provide language learners with the chance to ponder over the concept of freedom and being liberal, share their different interpretations, and possibly come to a new understanding of the term. I also thought that the context of the story could be a site for introducing certain linguistic elements like names of various trees, fruits, and colors.

With these in mind, I commenced my very first experience of recreating the story. I thought that I just had to read the story, imagine the scenes and the dialogues between the two main characters, and try to rewrite them in my own words. Below is an excerpt from the first draft of the story sent to my advisors.

- What is the reason for planting these cypress trees there, man? They have no outcome.
- Among all the trees that God has created, the only tree that is called liberal is the "cypress tree".
- It's strange. What is the reason?
- Other trees have fruit and shade in summer, and their leaves fall off in fall. They blossom in spring and dry in winter; but the Cypress tree is green throughout the year. Not being changed thorough the time is an attribute of liberals.

The comments I received from one of my advisors baffled me. She told me that the prepared draft was more like "a translated piece of work" than a "recreated story", was not "appealing enough to adolescent readers", and seemed "too didactic in tone and too direct in conveying its message". She told me that I had to "be more careful in selecting the lexical and grammatical structures as well as deployment of a lively language".

The consternation I felt led me to contemplate what could be done otherwise. Bearing the shortcomings in mind, in my second attempt, I endeavored to act more creatively by delineating the setting of the story (a large farm visited by a stranger); the scenes, smells and senses involved (aroma of peach blossoms filling the air, fresh apricots which could be seen on the walls); and more detailed conversations between the characters. Below is an excerpt.

- Once upon a time there was a stranger passing through a village. The people of the village were calm and kind. They owned large farms. ... Aroma of peach blossoms were smelled from the alleys and fresh apricots could be seen over the walls. The man's patience was exhausted. He picked some ripe apricots and ate them. Few steps ahead, he saw the owner of the garden and he whispered that it would be better to apologize because of eating those apricots without his permission... .
- Dear uncle, please accept my apologies. The fruits of your garden are as sweet as honey ... I picked a few of them without your permission.
- Bon appetite. The fruits which come out of the garden are the share of the passerby.
- You have a very fertile farm. Why didn't you plant other fruit trees instead of these cypresses which don't have any fruits?

However, while “seeing some improvements”, my advisors told me that the language was not “appropriate for the target audience”. They recommended that I read more on “story writing techniques” and act more “creatively” through inclusion of “expositions, epilogues, or introductory parts to the main story”; “imaginary characters”; “stretches of dialogues among characters”; “soliloquies or internal dialogues”; and “dramatic tensions or deliberate suspension of events”; among others.

Taking these comments into consideration and reading more on story writing techniques, I kept rewriting the story over and over; like a clay sculptor who is kneading and pressing the sculpting clay with her palms repeatedly to make it more pliable, and then pinching different parts of it with her fingers to create a desirable shape. With my fingers moving rapidly across the keyboard, and my words filling the screen, I changed the scenarios, settings, the characters and the dialogues exchanged among them numerous times and added fresh descriptions. I kept asking myself an array of questions: How does a certain character make the story interesting? Is he/she going to be liked by the adolescent readers? What should he/she look like? What could his/her personality be like? How believable is he/she? How could he/she be representative of Iranian and Islamic culture and lifestyle? Does the plot dull rather than pique the readers’ interest? Just to mention some.

Concerning the Liberal Cypress story, I thought that since the subject of the conversation revolved around a tree, the location of the story could be somewhere full of different trees. I imagined the story could be located in a garden in one of the villages near Zagros Mountains, a long mountain range in Iran. Then, I tried to describe the setting in details to make readers imagine where it is located. Concurrently, based on the theme and location of the story, I added the names of different trees, fruits, and colors to the story. Regarding the effects of colors on grabbing attention and retrieving words, I made some changes to the color of words (like using the color of fruits) and highlighted some certain structures (like “want to”) in bold type. Such manipulations of the typographical features of the text, technically called “input flooding” and “textual enhancement” (Sharwood Smith, 1993), were chiefly done for the sake of increasing “noticeability” and “salience” of certain linguistic features or items. As suggested by Schmidt (1995, as cited in Bao, 2018, p. 160), “target language forms will not be acquired unless they are noticed and one important way...is by increasing the salience of target language forms in input so that they are more likely to be noticed by learners”.

Besides, to be more descriptive; make the language sound more natural; and to provide language learners with an opportunity to examine noun-adjective collocations, I used various combinations of words like “tall thick trees”, “fertile fields”, “green grapes”, “white mulberry”, “purple figs”, “yellow apricots”, and “crimson cherries” throughout the text. In addition, while in the original version of the story there were only two characters, an anonymous question asker and a wise man, I thought that the conversation could take place between two members of a family who typically have a warm relationship like a wise grand-

father and his curious grandson; displaying the importance of “family” in the Iranian culture. I continued the story describing the way the young boy speaks to his grandfather, the kind of questions he asks about the trees in the garden, the fruits they bear and their benefits and how he eventually poses questions about the cypress tree. Here, to provide learners with opportunities for multiple exposures and hence retention of certain lexical items, I deliberately repeated certain vocabularies like the names of the trees throughout the story. Below is an excerpt:

- Dear grandpa, what is the name of this very tall tree with small white fruits?
- This is mulberry tree. We can eat fresh mulberries in the summer and dried ones in the winter. When you are angry or nervous, eating these sweet mulberries makes you feel relaxed.
- I think these are peach trees. I like unripe peaches more than ripe ones.
- Eating unripe fruits makes you have a stomachache. But ripe peach keeps the skin healthy. It is also good for eyesight.
- What about those tall green trees grandpa?
- They are cypress trees. They have no fruits but they are called “free” (Azadeh).
- How odd! They have no fruits but they are called “free”. Why?
- The grandfather thinks and then says: “Let me ask some questions”.

I then thought that the grandfather instead of revealing the answer quickly could ask several questions from his grandson. This “suspense” besides exposing learners to certain structures, like *“Does the...tree have green leaves in the winter?”*, could probably make them more eager to follow the story or even examine their own hunches.

- Does the apple tree have green leaves in the winter?
- No it doesn't.
- Tell me about the peach tree. Does the peach tree have green leaves in the winter?
- Surely not.
- Think about mulberry tree. Does the mulberry tree have green leaves in the winter?
- As much as I know, it doesn't.
- You see. Other trees have fruit and shade in summer, and their leaves fall off in fall. They blossom in spring and dry in winter; but look at the cypress tree. It is always green at all seasons and all days.

Bringing all these structures together was a strenuous task. I also realized that rewriting a story is more difficult than writing a new one since in addition to all the issues that had to be considered, such as attraction of the plot, age and interests of the target learners, pedagogic objectives, appropriate selection of vocabularies and grammatical structures, to mention some, I had to remain faithful to the original text too. Every word that I wrote, I asked myself if it was really what this story was meant to mean!

Baking the Sculpture

Another highly challenging phase was designing meaningful activities for the story. This may liken that of baking a wet clay sculpture in a kiln or household oven. Cautions should be taken as the clay could be prone to cracking. As a teacher who was used to dealing with mechanical, repetitive exercises such as true or false, fill in the blanks, and comprehension-check questions, my first drafts of activities resembled the kinds of activities I had seen in conventional textbooks. For example, considering the recreated text for the Liberal Cypress anecdote, “Wh” question forms with knee-jerk responses—which required learners to scan the text to find the “correct” answer—permeated my initial drafts. Below are examples of the exercises I initially prepared for Cypress Tree story:

- What kinds of tree are there in the grandfather’s garden?
- What fruits are there in the grandfather’s garden? What colors are they?
- Please rewrite the story in your own words and change it in the way that you like.
- Complete the following sentences:
 - a) I like to/don’t like to live in village with lots of trees because...
 - b) The most important thing I learned from my grandfather/grandmother is...

The first time I sent my activity part to my advisors, they crossed out all; writing a big “So what?” next to each. They both were emphatic that I had to take time preparing creative and mentally-challenging activities (Mishan & Timmis 2015; Tomlinson, 2011, 2013; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018) which provided learners with the opportunities to think, search, and express their ideas. My next drafts of activities for the Liberal Cypress anecdote, revised several times, contained more thought-provoking questions like the followings:

- Let’s think about the last line of the story: “One of the signs of being free (Azadeh) is being evergreen at all seasons and all days”. Does it make sense to you?
- How do you think people are like cypress trees?

Furthermore, searching more about the cypress tree, I found out that cypress is the oldest alive creature in Iran. Reading about the popularity of this tree among Iranian people from the past up to the now, I could see the footprints of this tree in the works of different Iranian authors, poets and artists; in their books, poems, paintings, carpets, handicrafts, religious symbols, historical monuments, and the like. Enthused by the ideas, I tried to add more enquiry-based questions; below are two:



Figure 1. *The Photo of an “Alam” Taken by me*

- We can see the symbol of cypress tree on this “Alam” that Shias use in the Mourning of Muharram and the day of Ashura. Do you know the reasons?



Figure 2. *The Cypress Trees Carved into a Stone Wall at Persepolis*

- Look at the following image. Why do we see cypress trees on the walls of Persepolis?

Later on, as I gave the prepared drafts to a number of my former students to self-study, I was surprised at the thoughtful answers provided by them. In their

symbolic interpretations, the students had commented that the fact that cypress has “good drought tolerance” and “is resistant to hurricanes... is a good example for Iranians who surrendered against the onslaught of an aggressive tribe but have not abandoned their essence”. They had written that cypress tree is “symbol of perseverance”; “strong people who try not to change in different situations”; and those “people of society who don’t change in the passing of time and adhere to their principles and their values and also they are legal [sic] to their homeland”. Referring to “Iranian soldiers who fought [sic] bravely in war in order to prevent other countries to enter our country”, one of the student had written that “Iranian soldiers in the holy defense are holy in Iranian culture...They are azadeh”.

As a language teacher, such a symbolic thinking and patriotic language produced by the students were at odds with the mundane language channeled by the conventional marketed coursebooks! As suggested by Safari (2019, p. 297), this kind of language learning and knowledge construction may be hoped to pave “a route through which each student can travel to reach a full understanding of their culture, self, and identities which opposes to trivial issues encountered in American/British English textbooks”.

Painting and Decorating the Sculpture

After rewriting the stories and designing the activities, or molding and baking the clay structures, it was time to prepare illustrations to make the stories and the activities more meaningful and interesting. To act more tactfully, I consulted the literature on materials’ visuals, layout and design (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018) and analyzed the visual elements of a number of English and Persian storybooks for teenagers; particularly the simplified versions of classic literary short stories rewritten by contemporary Iranian writers. Accordingly, I prepared a list of criteria that I could take into consideration while preparing or selecting the illustrations including their congruity with our Islamic-Iranian cultural values and Persian traditional artwork; their appeal to the target audience (adolescent learners); their meaningfulness and interpretability; inter alia.

Since each story demanded different illustrations, based on its contents and underlying themes, I had to decide about what to illustrate and how to illustrate; both of which required lots of thinking. For one story, I decided to have the pictures of its characters, for another one to illustrate the names of different groups of words mentioned in the story or the locations where the story was taking place. To depict what I had in mind, I had to imagine the characters’ physical features, costumes, facial expressions, actions, the settings, as well as the colors which could be used. Besides hand-drawn images, upon my advisors’ recommendations for using more realistic, meaningful, and purposeful illustrations, I decided to use real photos. I went to different places such as bazaar and tried to take photos by my personal camera. I felt like a sculptor who was choosing and mixing the paints in her palette and then brushing them onto the sculpture with various strokes.

However, as an immature graphic designer, it was arduous to me to work with graphic software like Paint and Photoshop. Initially, it took me plenty of time to do very little things like cutting and cropping pictures, putting them together, placing the illustrations inside the text, arranging the visual elements, positioning them aligned with the text or in the background to prepare the final illustrated draft of the stories. In addition to illustrations, I also had to decide about the page layouts which preferably had roots in Iranian art, as well as colors for the backgrounds. Nonetheless, it was not the end of the story. I remember that I once handed in the illustrated stories to one of my advisors and she made me aware of some points I had not noticed. For example, I had forgotten to resize all the pages so some of the pages had low resolutions and the hardcopies looked faded and poor in quality. This made me edit all the pages individually; which took me plenty of time. Figure 3 shows a sample of illustrated texts.

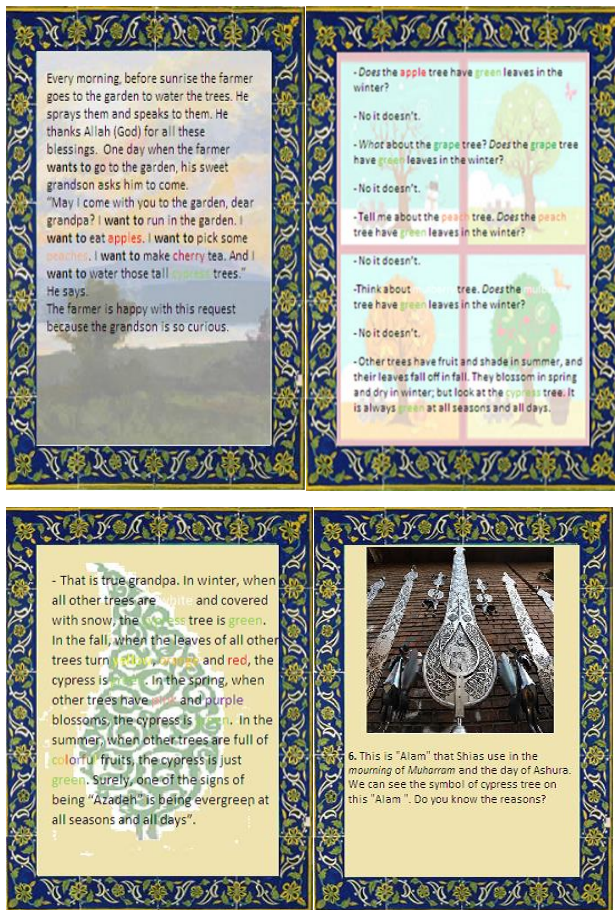


Figure 3. Samples of Illustrated Texts

Such challenges of designing materials by thinking outside the box, exerting imaginations, making informed decisions, and seeking ways to implement them made me constantly filled with senses of exhaustion and disappointments, on the one hand, and joy, pride, hope, and encouragement, on the other hand. Through such efforts in developing my own materials, there was nothing more challenging than convincing myself. As a product of mainstream, test-driven, transmission-based system of language education, appraising and discarding the traditional teaching and learning beliefs— which were strongly rooted in my cognition—and replacing them with some alternative views, like providing learners with spaces to critique issues and express their true selves, were extremely difficult. To me, it was like deconstructing a building and reconstructing a new one; I began breaking myself and the barriers inside and building a new version of me. Accordingly, I could see a number of changes occurring to me and my viewpoints as a result of being involved in this journey; some of which are discussed below.

Findings and Discussion

Practicing Artistry

Struggling with normative assumptions I had been socialized with was a big challenge I had to deal with. Throughout my years of learning English and teaching it, language was nothing beyond a means of communication enclosed in acquiring a number of vocabularies and grammatical structures and their functions. As frequently cited from Borg (2003, p. 88), “teachers’ prior language learning experiences establish cognitions about learning and language learning which form the basis of their initial conceptualization of L2 teaching during teacher education, and which may continue to be influential throughout their professional lives”. Arguing that the footsteps of teachers’ tacit knowledge could be detected in the materials created by them, Bouckaert (2017, p. 18) states that “classroom materials as objects crafted by a teacher... may reveal the teacher’s underlying ideas about what the role and function of materials are or should be”. However, through rewriting the stories, obsessively selecting words, thinking about the meanings and power behind them, their sounds and resonances, and seeing how words could be put together creatively, I started seeing language as “art” (Núñez & Téllez, 2015; Prowse, 2011, Timmis, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). In tandem with that, as I endeavored to go beyond my limits by creating imaginary characters and settings, inventing dialogues and activities, thinking about costumes, drawing illustrations and putting all these together, I practiced actualizing the creativity and artistry inside. Actually, creativity is not all what we are born with; it is rather reinforced by practice. Likewise, while at the beginning of the process, my ideas were limited, the more I stretched my imaginations, consulted various sources, and drew inspiration from the events, the more resourceful I became, and fresher ideas found ways to my work.

Such instances of growth in self-artistry bear resemblance to Núñez and Téllez’s (2015) study in which the teachers attending a materials development seminar in Bogotá (Colombia) reported on their personal and professional

growth including fostering their “creativity”, “self-confidence”, and “self-esteem” as well as enhancing their expertise and knowledge in materials development. Self-citing themselves, Núñez and Téllez (2009) state that “materials development contributes directly to teachers’ professional growth insofar as it betters their knowledge, skills and creativity, raises their consciousness as regards teaching and learning procedures, and allows them to act as agents of permanent change” (p. 184). In addition, such a perspective-change bears resemblance to what a novice teacher-materials developer in Brandão’s (2018) study experienced. Likewise, materials design provided me “with opportunities of learning more about English” and “imprinting identity on language activities” (p. 263). This also concurs with Shawer’s (2010) study in which those EFL teachers engaged in developing and making classroom-level curriculum expressed more “job satisfaction, a sense of development, self-respect and creativity” in comparison to “curriculum-transmitters” who lamented “job dissatisfaction, routine work, dependency and lack of confidence” (p. 614).

Practicing Respect

This journey took me somewhere that made me aware of the significance of some issues I was unaware of before. Mentioning one of them, I can point to the importance of “respect”. Respect is not only a feeling of admiring someone or what they do, but also appreciating what they think and have in their minds. I could see that through preparing mechanical and infantilizing activities like simple information-checking questions and tasks with predetermined answers which required minimal students’ cognitive and affective engagement or generated little or no worthwhile responses from them, I was depriving them of higher-order thinking *disrespectfully*. My advisors’ comments on the designed activities made me aware of the importance of respecting and appreciating the variety of thoughts and views held by learners. With such constant reminders, I gradually shifted from preparing controlled tasks to posing more genuine, thought-provoking, and open-ended queries which fostered greater student involvement and hopefully increased opportunities for not only language learning but also pondering over issues related to past and immediate life.

Practicing Self-reliance

Self-reliance was another lesson I learnt and practiced throughout the work. To me an outstanding incident of self-reliance occurred when the two illustrators who had initially agreed to help me in illustrating the stories informed that they could not cooperate. For someone inexperienced in the field of graphic design and the related software such as Paint and Photoshop, it was such a fiasco. As sympathized by Thurairaj and Roy (2012), “many of the teachers are not gifted graphic designers nor do they have the flexibility to spend more time creating a visually appealing layout for their materials [and] even if they have the design skill various constraints influenced their decision” (p. 232). Nonetheless, despite my lack of experience, I made up my mind not to surrender. My advisors

had a key role in aiding me to control my feelings and not lose heart. At that time, I realized that *I* was the only person who could help me. I started drawing sketches, taking photos by my camera, learning how to work with graphic software, editing images, inserting them in the texts all by myself. All these made me feel confident and exercise my own powers.

Nonetheless, it is worth confessing that such self-reliance was frequently accompanied by senses of self-doubt, uncertainty, confusion, and even at times frustrations. Besides moments of confusion and wrestling I experienced while rewriting the anecdotes, designing the activities, and self-creating the visuals, I kept wondering whether the students, parents, teachers and administrators would react positively to such teacher-generated materials, or they would assume them as “ragged”, “tatty”, or “unprofessional” and still prefer “slickly produced commercial course books to materials made by teachers themselves” (Block, 1991, p. 212). However, as put by Kerr (1981, p. 370) a couple of decades ago, “[T]he senses of uncertainty and frustration...may actually be necessary prerequisites in the process of design. They may indicate that the designer is wrestling internally with various ideas of how to proceed, attempting to express thoughts still only partially formed”.

Practicing Ownership

Prior to this experience, I saw myself as a consumer using the products prepared by others; mainly foreign publishers. The journey provided me with the opportunity to truly experience the pleasant feeling of making something by my hands and the unique sense of “ownership”. As was also stated by Parsayian et al., this “decision to become a composer, rather than a mere spectator, pushed me out of my comfort zone and made me face the challenges of becoming someone I had never been before” (2016, p. 202). I truly felt “the teacher’s great feeling of satisfaction to present something created by himself/herself” (Salas, 2004, p. 6) when I asked a group of six language teachers to evaluate the designed stories and the activities. They were surprised at the way the stories had been recreated. The sequence of events, dialogues, illustrations, and activities all were the points that attracted the attention of the teachers. Appreciating the endeavor, the teachers commented that “it is not easy at all...for sure you have lots of thoughts behind all these” and “word by word of these stories demand hours of thinking”. One of the teachers thought that one of the advantages of such materials is that “concept especially the cultural concepts in this story are usually familiar for the students and this helps them to understand the linguistic part too”. Agreeing with her, another teacher stated that “when we read the stories, they brush up what we have already heard and make us think deeply”. With a focus on the activity part, one of the teachers mentioned that “the questions that make students think and make their thoughts tangible by using language is very important without them something is missing”. The teachers also spoke about their own possible development through teaching by stating that “while students are growing and learning some important things about their own life and lifestyle, their teacher is also experiencing something and learning

something about his/her life, too". These nice comments, along with their constructive criticisms, made me sense a feeling of ownership and self-trust which was in contrast with the consumption sense perpetuated by top-down curricula (Parsaiyan, et al., 2016; Safari, 2019).

Practicing Roots-returning

When I decided to recreate the Persian stories, one of my aims was to preserve Iranian-Islamic cultural identity. While initially I assumed that simply by recreating Persian classic literary works, inserting Persian words (like characters' proper names, Iranian foods and untranslatable concepts) I was taking a counter-hegemonic stance towards Western products and I was doing a large part of my duty towards resisting against "the traces of knowledge colonization, ideological domination, and mind suppression smothering the local knowledge, interests, values" (Safari, 2019, p. 296), later, I realized that Iranian-Islamic heritage cannot be epitomized in just some words, but in the mindset which is brought to the fore. My viewpoint was broadened throughout the time in a way that whatever I thought about such as words, characters, costumes, dialogues, illustrations, and layouts, I inquired into the ways they could be representative of our Iranian-Islamic roots. This made me search more about the concepts and topics of the stories and try to make students think about and challenge them; examples of which were asking learners to search about cypress tree in Iranian culture or introducing some Iranian good eating habits that are being forgotten. This practice of returning to roots was a turning point in my professional life.

In consort to the above themes, what stands out in my personal and professional change is the crucial role of "expert mediation" provided by my ELT advisors (Golombek & Johnson, 2017; Johnson & Golombek, 2016). Our oral dialogic interactions, the comments in the margins of the various drafts of the stories, and the "so what" questions posed by them provided me with space to ponder over and "externalize" my rationales concerning the contents' and activities' pedagogical values and relevance. As stated by Golombek and Johnson (2017), "expert mediation can be identified as harnessing the transformative power of both written and oral narrative activity in ways that promote the development of teacher/teaching expertise" (p. 26).

Concluding Remarks

Given the paucity of narrative enquiries focusing on materials developers' identity (re)-construction, the present study was an attempt to story the challenges and identity changes experienced by a language teacher venturing into developing English language learning materials. For her, the provocation phase occurred when she attended a materials development course whose instructor encouraged her to prepare her own class materials based on Iranian literary heritage. Vexed by lack of concerted efforts with this regard, she started consulting and exploring the pertinent literature until she eventually refined and

focused her attention on recreating five anecdotes from Sa'di's *The Rose Garden*. Like a sculptor making clay structures, she went through the challenging stages of recreating the stories in an entertaining yet pedagogically-informed ways (kneading and modeling the material to create the desired shape); designing cognitively-demanding activities (hardening the sculpture by allowing it to dry); and creating visuals (painting and decorating the sculpture). All these challenges made her revisit a number of normative assumptions (like relying heavily on mechanical, infantilizing exercises and considering more intellectually-demanding ones) and practice self-arts, self-reliance, respect, ownership, and roots-returning in developing materials.

The findings of this narrative enquiry could be enlightening for English teachers, teacher educators, curriculum developers, materials writers, and policy-makers who are interested in creating locally-appropriate materials and learning about the challenges experienced by materials writers. This may also encourage administrators and teacher educators to open spaces for language teacher to practice developing their own class materials and explore their trajectory of change. Further narrative enquiries could also aid to see if the findings of this study are supported in other contexts and how teachers' varied lived experiences and social and contextual factors may impact the results.

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