Does the Text Embrace the Child? The Implied Reader in the Stories of the Elementary School Persian Textbooks (in the First Three Grades)

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Introduction

In the *National Curriculum of the Islamic Republic of Iran* eleven areas of teaching and learning are defined, one of which is "Persian language and literature". In this document, the approach to teaching of this area is "communicative" which not only orients the classroom teaching and learning, but also pervades other mediators such as elementary school Persian textbooks, wherein the communicative approach is more outstanding than other textbooks because they mainly deal with literature, which is the manifestation of language.

From Bakhtin's point of view, language essentially addresses, that is, "all language is addressed to someone, never uttered without consciousness of a relationship between the speaker and the addressee" (Guerin et al, 2005: 362). Therefore, any media dealing with language (whether oral, written, or visual) always forms a relationship with the audience, and so do the elementary school Persian textbooks. It is therefore important to address how Persian textbooks communicate with their audiences through their stories, as this communication plays a role in the child's construction of subjectivity.

Research Method, Literature and Purpose

This research is qualitative. The samples are fourteen stories of elementary school Persian textbooks (the first three years). Data analysis method is deductive-inductive content analysis in terms of which I analyze the samples based on the components of Aiden Chambers' theory of "the reader in the book", namely, style, point of view, taking sides and tell-tale gaps, as well as the criterion of "taking sides of children and adolescents as the fictional characters" as proposed by the picturebook group of SUCCLS.

The literature review reveals that the issue of implied reader in textbooks has especially been taken as a theoretical framework in mathematics and geometry, but it is understood and applied differently from what Chambers conceptualizes. As far as the objective of this research is concerned, it purports to investigate the implied reader of the stories of elementary school Persian textbooks (the first three years) based on Aiden Chambers' theory of "the reader in the book". There are three objectives: first, investigating the ability of stories used in Persian textbooks in drawing the readers in to the text; second, discerning the embedded child in the stories; and third, examining whether these stories can be considered as children's works.

Discussion

In this section, I investigate Chambers' components of implied reader in the stories.

1. Style

In the analysis of style, plot, tone, figures of speech, imagery, choice of words, omissions occurring in the process of retellings, simplification and compression of stories in the retellings are considered. The main weakness of the plot in most stories is underdeveloped obstacles the protagonists face. In other words, the plot is either devoid of serious challenges or the challenges are so superficial that the child solves the problems quickly; while no space of inquiry, problem-solving, decision-making and constructing subjectivity is left for the child. Imageries are weak too. The words are very formal and adult-like and sensory verbs are rarely used. The tone of speech is serious, cold, and distant from the child. It is used in an abstract and descriptive way. The omission of parts of the story and the fading of humor are stylistic changes in retellings that have reduce the aesthetics of the work.

2. point of view

The omniscient and limited third person point of view are the two dominant points of view for narrating these stories. Surprisingly, no stories are narrated in first person and the child is not the narrator.

3. Taking sides

Due to strict educational goals, most of the stories do not take the side of children as much as they should; hence, didacticism leaves no space for being child-likeness and experiencing childhood. The tone of the narrator in these stories is warning and cautionary; the child has to obey the adult's warnings about the consequences of her/ his actions and not

transgress the rules, otherwise s/he will have to face the consequences of her/his behavior.

4. Tell-tale gaps

Regarding tell-tale gaps, there are deep deficiencies. The stories do not call for ambiguity and do not allow the reader to have different interpretations; therefore, the reader cannot participate in meaning-making. It seems that the reason is the tendency towards strong didacticism, since the priority is the message transmitted, not giving space to the audience to create meaning.

Conclusion

In this research, I have investigated three questions: 1. can the stories used in the elementary school Persian textbooks draw the child into the text? How do these stories establish relationship with the child? 2. What concept of the child is embedded in these stories? 3. Can these stories be considered children's works or not?

The answer to the first question is negative. The concept of the child embedded in these stories is a static child who does not participate in meaning-making and imagination. The stories do not "solve this matter amicably". S/he is an ignorant and cognitively incomplete being who, under the heavy shadow of adult authority, must submit to intense didacticism in order to reach the adulthood developmental endpoint. Given the findings, the answer to the third question seems negative, too. But what is the solution? I suggest that the textbook policymakers and authors benefit from existing children's literature which can both meet the goals of literacy and language learning intended by formal

education and establish a democratic relationship with the child by taking her/him into account.

Keywords: Aiden Chambers, implied reader, story, elementary school Persian textbooks, child

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