Literature Logs and Instructional Conversations Using Quranic Verses in English

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Abstract This paper seeks to establish the suitability and feasibility of Quranic verses in English in the reading classroom as a literary text. This literary text merged with the right techniques of teaching and right classroom activities would yield the same intended learning outcomes at the end of a reading session. Since the main intent is extracting the literary, aesthetic, and linguistic features in the verses, it brings about the possibility of shining some light on the moral and ethical content of the verses. Albeit indirectly, it allows the artistic combination of moral aesthetics and ethics to come into practice.

Keywords Literary Text, Literature Logs, Instructional Conversations, Cultural Content, Communicative Language Learning

1. Introduction

Reading is an important skill in the study of literature. At the university level, there is an emphasis on the four language skills-reading, writing, listening and speaking-through instruction in language and literary studies in activities designed to improve these skills. There are two other components which are integral ones to the four language skills-Vocabulary and Grammar. As a whole, a reading session, are steps concerned with making a point using a literary text for a discussion, using interesting strategies for the reading process. If planned well, the strategies would integratively develop skills not only in reading, but also in speaking, listening and writing.

This paper seeks to establish the suitability and feasibility of Quranic verses in English in the reading classroom as a literary text. This literary text merged with the right techniques of teaching and right classroom activities would yield the same intended learning outcomes at the end of a reading session.

In an attempt to integrate, incorporate and promote multicultural practices in the language learning classroom, this writer makes a rigorous effort in selecting classroom materials or literary texts depicting a diversified socio-cultural variety to expose her students to different global human societies. For example, this writer has used Japanese short stories, Chinese poems, lyrics of Spanish songs, all of which were translated into the English language. The text chosen for this technique was selected Quranic verses in English.

Using Quranic Verses in English is an attempt to change the comfortable vision zone of the Quran being viewed solely from the religious angle. Even after being totally aware of its unique quality of linguistic and literary features blended harmoniously with its religious content, no attempt was made to bring this sacred text into the language and literature classroom. Its limit of relevance was only until now (advocated against by this writer) brought into the religious classroom.

The abundance of linguistic and literary features found in the Quranic verses in English could be used effectively solely through viewing the text from this perspective. Thus, bringing Quranic verses in English into the language and literature classroom can address several concerns in the...
process of language teaching and learning:

1) Student engagement, due to familiarity.
2) Student increased classroom participation, due to knowledge.
3) Multicultural practices, for affect.
4) Research based techniques developed by Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) proven effective in language learning.

The use of Quranic verses in English addresses heritage with the realization that most of the students come from the Islamic background since way-back, generations ago. For many Muslim students, the sacred book has been ingrained and the contents have become a way of life. In the Arab world, a compulsory part of the primary and secondary academic curriculum of the public school system is Quranic studies (in Arabic). Unless students major or specialize in Islamic studies at the university level, it is most likely that the opportunities of interacting with the sacred text would be nil.

Creating the possibility of using Quranic verses in English is a sure way of bringing students closer to their own culture and heritage once again. Opportunities through teaching techniques and pedagogy are created for these young adults to reflect and ponder on the content of the Quranic verses in English. Since the main intent is extracting the literary, aesthetic, and linguistic features in the verses, it brings about the possibility of shining some light on the moral and ethical content of the verses. Albeit indirectly, it allows the artistic combination of moral aesthetics and ethics to come into practice.

1.1. Current Research on Cultural Competence

Cakir (2006) discusses the importance of developing culture awareness in the language classroom.

While developing cultural awareness in the EFL classroom it should be kept in mind that the native language is learned along with the ways and attitudes of the social group, and these ways and attitudes find expression through the social group. Learning to understand a foreign culture should help students of another language to use words and expressions more skillfully and authentically; to understand levels of language and situationally appropriate; to act naturally with persons of the other culture, while recognizing and accepting their different reactions, and to help speakers of other tongues feel at home in the students’ own culture.

While most learners indeed find positive benefits in cross-cultural living on teaching experiences, nevertheless a number of people experience certain psychological blocks and other inhibiting effects of the second culture. Teachers can help students to turn such an experience into one of increased cultural and self-awareness. It is possible that learners can feel alienation in the process of learning a foreign language, alienation from people in their home culture, the target culture, and from themselves. In teaching foreign language we need to be sensitive to the fragility of students by using techniques that promote cultural understanding.[1]

ESL (2012) discusses cultural sensitivity issues:

One of the biggest problems ESL teachers face is that one ESL classroom may be filled with students from many nations, even if, for example, they are all Spanish-speaking countries. The cultures of Ecuador, Peru, Argentina, Columbia, and Mexico are vastly different, and teachers should not assume that students who share a common native language will share similar cultural backgrounds. Even students from different regions of the same country will have different cultural beliefs and traditions that should be honored and preserved.

The first step toward ESL classroom and cultural sensitivity agreements is to create a learning environment that recognizes students’ different cultures in a meaningful way. Classroom rules should be posted in all appropriate languages. Decorations such as country maps, flags, and pictures of prominent leaders can bring a taste of each nation into the ESL classroom in a positive way. Students should be encouraged to work with others from different cultures. Savvy teachers can arrange group projects designed to encourage students to share and explore one another’s cultures.[2]

Williams (2010) “examines how the issue of ethnicity can influence the effectiveness of teaching and learning of English as a second language (ESL).” Williams goes on to say:

Effective English language teaching is much more than simply passing on the mechanics of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

The issue of ethnicity is one key factor that has been identified as playing a marked role in ESL teaching and learning.

Often, the terms race and ethnicity are used interchangeably. In some environments, the two terms would be appropriate synonyms. However, in other contexts there is a clear distinction between race and ethnicity. A commonly-held distinction between the two terms is that ‘race’ is usually associated with physical differences (phenotype) such as skin colour, while ‘ethnic’ refers to groups set apart by a shared cultural identity (e.g. on the basis of language, religion or history).

So, in defining ethnicity, it can be asserted that the term refers to shared elements of culture rather than physical characteristics.

For ESL teachers, it has become increasingly clear that effective English teaching is enhanced when they have an awareness of ethnic issues associated with the learning group.

Sensitivity about religious beliefs, for example, is important when teachers give even simple contextual examples in teaching grammar principles. A sentence like “I patted the dog” would contain no problems for many learners. But for an Islamic student, whose religious laws forbid
contact with dogs, the grammar learning could be lost behind the personal internal religious conflict.

By contrast, a teacher who is aware of ethnic issues and backgrounds of students can use positive references to ethnic experiences as a means of stimulating greater interest in the learning process. Using examples from students’ ethnicity can evoke positive responses and create valuable learning experiences.

So, students’ ethnicity is, without doubt, an issue in regards to English language teaching and it is certainly a factor in the language acquisition process.

Teachers who do identify and accept that their cultural values and ethnicity can influence their teaching will be more aware of the dangers in loading their teaching with these very same values, potentially at the risk of alienating some students at times from the learning process.

Ethnicity is, therefore, important within all elements of the learning and teaching processes in the English language classroom (and beyond).

In schools, it has been recognized implicitly or explicitly that the ethnicity of students is important in the ESL teaching process. However, as has been identified, this is sometimes an underlying feature that is not always in the forefront of every teacher at all times.

Ethnicity’s importance as a factor in effective teaching/learning is significant—not only in terms of student ethnicity—but also in regard to the ethnicity of teachers and teacher educators. The values, culture and beliefs of a teacher can colour the way language teaching is undertaken—and can result in inclusion/exclusion in the same way that a student’s ethnicity can affect the learning process.

In conclusion, therefore, educators need to be formally aware that ethnicity does influence the effectiveness of ESL teaching. Being aware of the issue of ethnicity from all perspectives is therefore a significant step in mutual understanding and hence in the effectiveness of the ESL learning process.[3]

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence has done extensive research on four areas in strategies which were labeled by William Saunders as “Studying Literature—Four Strategies that Work”:

1). Build students’ background knowledge.
2). Draw on students’ personal experiences.
3). Promote extended discourse through writing and discussion.
4). Assist students in rereading the pivotal portions of the text.[4]

Of the four areas above, every single one has to do with the literary text used in the classroom in one way or another. For the first area, to build on students’ background knowledge, their love and interest for reading beyond the classroom setting must be cultivated. This is done by arousing their interest in the classroom initially and then the student can be motivated enough to make time outside the classroom for more reading. For the second area, students are encouraged to directly connect or apply the main point or message of the reading material in the classroom to their own experiences or thoughts. In other words, to personalize the context and thus the material selection that is culturally familiar will help in understanding. Then the third area, promoting extended discourse through writing and discussion, has its initial anchor on the material or literary text selected. These are perhaps written assignments or further work on oral presentations from or through discussions of the material or main idea or message of the reading material chosen. Then the pivotal portions of the text again dwells on the inescapable literary text or reading material the teacher chooses to exploit in the classroom. Through suitable strategies, the teacher brings focus to one chosen section or portion of the text at a time to dwell on for a deeper understanding.

A research study was done by Susan Wallace (2004) whereby SIOP’s components 7 and 8 were looked at closely coupled with her experience in the teaching field.

SIOP’s components 7 and 8:
7). Explicitly link concepts to students’ backgrounds and experiences
8). Explicitly link past learning and new concepts

Wallace came up with a new strategy for teachers to try out linking components 7 and 8 to tie students’ experiences to the literary text or reading material used in classroom. The sample lesson plan and technique by Wallace is called “Literature Logs and Instructional Conversations”.

A Literature Log is the term used to mean the individual responses to questions posed to students on the direct and relevant connection or application of the message of the literary text or reading material used in the classroom to students’ personal experiences, feelings and thoughts. And these would be kept in one folder with a contents page that would list all the readings done in the classroom or outside of the classroom. Literature Logs have been called portfolios, journals, diaries, etc.

Instructional Conversations refer to the verbal discourse generated in the classroom in an attempt to seek a deeper understanding of the reading material or literary text. These instructional conversations can be done with peers in group work or pair work or with the teacher as a class discussion. Instructional conversations have been termed as verbal scaffolding, classroom discourse, textual evaluation verbatim, etc.

The highlights of Wallace’s lesson plan of Literature Logs and Instructional Conversations are:

Step 1:
Create pre-reading and post-reading questions or prompts Pre-reading question or prompt: a generic probe about students’ experiences that might be similar to those of the main character/s or the main message of the reading material or literary text.

Step 2:
Briefly review the reading material or literary text again building on student responses in a think-aloud format
Review the procedure for tracking story events and noting
when these events are similar to or different from experiences discussed by the class (two-column notes, post its, adapted story sequence chart …). Students read or listen to the text (pairs, small groups, tape, buddy reading….)

**Step 3:**
Present the second literature log question or prompt; model a response. Allow time for students to write about or discuss the prompt.

Facilitate the second instructional conversation in which students discuss similarities and differences between and among their experiences and those of the characters.[5]

## 2. Quranic Literature Log of a Researcher

This particular paper marks the first paper of a well-thought out plan of this writer for a life-long pursuit of a Quranic Literature Log of her own but perhaps not in the same meaning to that used for a student’s Literature Log. This writer will start having a folder of her own called Quranic Literature Log where a list of selected Quranic verses in English by various translators to be used as literary texts or reading material are merged with the technique through various sources for teaching in the Language and Literature classroom. Through this log, a series of new research papers will be written and published.

For this study specifically, the entry which relevantly and tentatively informs is as follows (as shown in **Box 1- Quranic Literature Log**):

**Box 1. Quranic Literature Log**

| Quranic Verses: 1-8 of Surah (94) Al-Shrrhh (Cooling the Temper)(APPENDIX 1) | The Qur'an: A Reformist Translation by Dr.EdipYuksel, LaythSaleh al-Shaiban and Dr.Martha Schulte-Nafeh (Yuksel, al-Shaiban and Nafeh, 2007) |
| Topic of verses: Relief | Technique: Literature Logs and Instructional Conversations |

### 2.1. The Lesson Plan

**Technique:** Literature Logs and Instructional Conversations

**Text:** Verses 1-8, Surah (94) Al-Shrrhh (APPENDIX 1)

**Level:** Intermediate (undergraduate)

**Duration:** Two Hours

The following are the main objectives of a Critical Reading session:

**2.1.1. Objectives**

1) Build students’ background knowledge: Done in bringing focus to the benefit of reflections and discipline and control of one’s temper can prevent damages. Regret and remedy or repair is also brought to focus.

2) Draw on students’ personal experience: Done in recording in table and Venn Diagram in pair work.

3) Promote extended discourse through writing and discussion: Done in Writing Assignment as a post reading activity of what would one change if one had stopped to think before acting on impulse.

4) Assist students in rereading the pivotal portions the text: Done in discussions one verse at a time, looking at any vocabulary that need definitions or meaning explained.

5) Use the four skills:

   i) Listening: Done in listening to partner’s experience and recording it in table and Venn Diagram.

   ii) Speaking: Done in Oral Presentation of Venn Diagram and also Pair work and class discussions.

   iii) Reading: Done in Reading 8 verses.

   iv) Writing: Done in writing experiences in table and Venn Diagram, and Writing Assignment.

The teacher can begin by distributing copies of the English translated version of the Qur'an by Dr Edip Yuksel, specifically verses 1-8, Surah (94) Al-Shrrhh (Cooling the Temper)(APPENDIX 1), and informing the students where the text is from and also the person who translated the text.

To create a prereading prompt, the teacher can simply probe the title of the surah which is Cooling the Temper. Possible higher-order level questions could be:

1) Just by the title, what does temper mean?

2) Have you ever been in that situation? How do you feel when there is a need to cool the temper?

3) What brought about that situation or feeling? What caused the situation or feelings?

4) What did you do to vent out your frustrations? What did you do when you lost your temper?

5) How did you handle it? How did you repair or remedy the situation to make it better?

Now work in pairs. Relate to your partner your experience and your partner will record your experience and vice versa. Then work together and look at both your experiences again. Make two columns for you and your partner and divide each of your experiences into three parts. It is like dividing a story into three parts -beginning, middle and end. Show a simple table as shown in Table 1- Story Table:

Then, still working together, look at any similarities in your experiences. Similarities can be in the form of feelings, actions or even thoughts. Draw a Venn Diagram, large and clear to explain the similarities and differences in your experiences. Alternatively, the teacher can distribute copies of large Venn Diagrams for students to use. This Venn Diagram will be the visual aid for an oral presentation. Each pair will decide on which one will come up to present their experiences with their Venn Diagram. An example of a Venn Diagram (as shown in Figure 1- Venn Diagram:
The teacher can give 20 minutes for this activity. The teacher will move around the class listening and guiding when students start recording their experiences in the table and then the Venn diagram. Then the presentations can start.

After the presentations, the teacher can reorganize her class by asking students to first read the eight verses silently and then listen to teacher for a model reading of the literary text- Cooling of the Temper. The teacher rereads the first verse and stops after it.

1). Did We not relieve your chest

After the first verse, the teacher can go straight into a brief historical background. The first is actually talking about the event that marks Muhammad’s Prophethood. Angel Gabriel literally performed heart surgery on Muhammad when he cut open Muhammad’s chest, to cleanse Muhammad’s heart of all his past sins. Then, the teacher reads verse two:

2). Take from you your load,

The load in verse two refers to the past sins which is weighing heavy and has been uplifted by Allah. The teacher can easily slide into verse three and tie the vocabularies of load and strain, both refer to the past sins and both connote unwanted weight. The cause and effect relationship of sins being a load which strains the back.

3). Which had put strain on your back?

The teacher moves on and goes verse by verse. At the end of the explanation of the last verse, it is response by writing time. The teacher gives a writing assignment:

Looking at your experiences again, at which point do you think it would have been better for you to have stopped and “cool the temper”? At which point in time during the experience should you have used the reminder in these verses to reflect? If you could turn back the hands of time, what would you change in the experience? What would you wish you hadn’t done? What would you have liked to do

Table 1. Story Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions:</th>
<th>What brought about the situation or feelings? What caused the situation or feelings?</th>
<th>What did you do to vent out your frustrations? What did you do when you lost your temper?</th>
<th>How did you handle it? How did you repair or remedy the situation to make it better?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hassan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Magda</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Conclusions

Teachers are aware that having a classroom with mixed or differing abilities is a challenging task on the teacher’s shoulders. A good teacher rarely follows a textbook step by step as many aspects of teaching and learning need to be taken into consideration. With mixed abilities or all with the same level of ability, a teacher must create opportunities for students to demonstrate each one’s level of knowledge and to create opportunities to for students to express the way each one thinks. Differentiation practice in classroom strategy and in assessment strategy is always a useful tool for teachers to equip themselves with for more effective teaching and learning.

Where assessment is concerned, evaluation is then called for but still heeding the differentiation approach. The assessments should reflect both social and academic performance. Therefore evaluation of assessment should involve all of the following:

1) Completion of task
2) Ability to understand through listening to teacher and peers
3) Ability to explain or make connections or predict in material and content
4) Ability to demonstrate individuality and creativity
5) Availability and ability to make choices in tasks which consider flexibility for different strengths and needs.

This technique, Literature Logs and Instructional Conversations, text of 8 Quranic verses in English and the suitable activities carried out in the classroom, each plays its own role in a teacher’s successful critical reading session. They are an integral part of the whole teaching session. The same set of intended learning outcomes or objectives was achieved at the end of the Quranic Critical Reading session.

Appendix 1

The Ninety-Fourth Surah, Al-Shrrhh, by Dr Edip Yuksel

In the name of God, the Gracious, the Compassionate

The teacher can explain that the reverence and respect to the Almighty precedes every surah or chapter of the Quran. These words emphasize that the verses that follow are indeed from the Almighty. These words underscore the authenticity of the Quran. The words Gracious and Compassionate are some of attributes of Allah and these words are also two of His ninety-nine names.

1. Did We not relieve your chest,
2. Take from you your load,
3. Which had put strain on your back?
4. We have raised your remembrance,
5. So with hardship comes ease.
6. With hardship comes ease.
7. So when you are done, then stand.
8. To your Lord you shall seek.

Appendix 2

Using Information Technology

Useful Websites

4. The way each verse is dealt with by each translator or group of translators is so thorough. After the translation of each verse, a thorough endnote presentation capturing the essence of the surah is laid out. This website is especially useful for researchers and students in the field of translations and comparative literary studies. Retrieved from http://www.quranix.net/?RTQ=1&TMG=1&MA=1&RK=1&SH=1&TE=1&A=1&L=en&NA=10&S=1 on June 30th, 2012.
5. A linguistic resource showing the theoretical aspects of linguistics: Arabic grammar, semantics, pragmatics, lexicology, phonology, morphology and syntax of each word in the Quran, the descriptive aspects of linguistics: comparative linguistics, etymology, phonetics and sociolinguistics of words and phrases in the Quran, and the applied linguistics aspects: language and vocabulary development, psycholinguistics and stylistics of the words and phrases in the Quran. At the end of each surah, there is an audio Quran recitation of the surah by the recitor, Saad AlGhamadi. Retrieved from http://corpus.quran.com/wordbyword.jsp on June 30th, 2012.

Teachers can also download Islamic songs on CDs for classroom use. It comes with lyrics of each song, a list of artists and their songs. Retrieved from http://www.islamiclyrics.net/on June 30th, 2012.

Appendix 3

Classroom Application of Quranic Verses in English

Quranic Verses in English: Teaching Imagery

In the case of Descriptive imagery, an illustrated example is from Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s English Translations of the Quran, Verse 29 of Surah(18) Al-Kahf:

**Surah (18) Al-Kahf**

**Verse 29, line 9:** That will scald their faces

**What type of imagery?** Descriptive imagery. The image gives a vivid description of what the "water like melted brass” can do.
Senses: visual, tactile

Not only can one imagine feeling the pain of being scalded but one can also picture the disfigurement that the scalding will cause to the faces of the sinners.

In the case of Figurative imagery using the literary device, simile, an illustrated example is from Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s English Translations of the Quran, Verse 65 of Surah(37) As-Saffat:

**Surah(37) As-Saffat**

Verse 65, lines 1-3:

The shoots of its fruit-stalks
Are like the heads
Of devils

What type of imagery? Figurative Imagery using the literary device: simile.

The word “like” tells one that a simile is being used to compare the shoots to devils’ heads.

Senses: visual.

This image gives a vivid picture in our minds of how evil-looking fruits of this tree in Hell are.

In the case of Figurative imagery, using the literary device, metaphor, an illustrated example is from Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s English Translations of the Quran, Verse 50 of Surah(38) Sad:

**Surah (38) Sad**

Verse 50, lines 2 and 3:

Whose doors will (ever)
Be open for them

What type of imagery? Figurative Imagery using the literary device: metaphor.

These doors to the beautiful gardens are forever open to the righteous. Normally, when one thinks of doors, they can either be open or closed. But these doors in Heaven will forever be open. The image metaphorically compares the entrance or passage into Heaven, which we cannot truly visualize, to “doors” in which case Heaven is compared to a gracious house or one’s eternal home. The image of open doors depicts Heaven as an abode that feels familiar, hospitable, welcoming.

Senses: visual.

The image suggests a mental picture.

In the case of Figurative imagery using the literary device, symbol, an illustrated example is from Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s English Translations of the Quran, Verse of Surah(15) Muhammad:

**Surah (47) Muhammad**

Verse 15, lines 6-8:

Rivers of milk
Of which the taste
Never changes

What type of imagery? Figurative imagery using a literary device: symbol.

Again, unlike the earthly milk which can turn sour without refrigeration, this “milk” in Heaven tastes forever fresh. This “milk” can be found in the form of rivers – in abundance.

Sense: visual, gustatory, tactile, olfactory.

This image makes one imagine whether this “milk” looks like that consumed on earth; how delicious it must taste, and cool it must feel, and fresh it must smell.

**Quranic Verses In English: Stylistics Application**

An illustrated example of a stylistics analysis of Quranic verses in English by translated by Muhammad Asad is Verses 16-18 of Surah(77) Al-Mursalat:

(16) Did We not destroy [so many of] those [sinners] of olden days? (17) And We shall let them be followed by those of later times: (18) [for] thus do We deal with such as are lost in sin.

Analysis: Verses sixteen to eighteen are put together to form one paragraph. These verses explain the punishment that awaits sinners in the Day of Judgement-destruction. Verse sixteen questions and verses seventeen and eighteen answers verse sixteen. Verse seventeen begins with the conjunction “And” and is in the future tense and verse eighteen begins with the conjunction[for] followed by “thus” and is in the present tense. Verse seventeen implies that suffering in the hereafter is bound to befall the sinners of later times even if God wills to spare them in this world. “We” is used to refer to God in these verses. These verses show the timelessness, universality and unchanging laws of God - for the past, present and future - sinners are destroyed.

An illustrated example of a stylistics analysis of Quranic verses in English by Abdullah Yusuf Ali is Verse 27 of Surah (77) Al-Mursalat:

27. And made therein
Mountains standing firm
Lofty (in stature);
And provided for you
Water sweet (and wholesome)?

Analysis: Verse twenty-seven tells one of Allah’s creative activity and hence, His existence when it is evident that mountains-hard and solid, high in altitude - are able to distribute or provide man with pure delicious, sweet water in the form of rivers and springs. The conjunction “and” is used twice in lines one and four. The metaphor is describing the mountains as “standing firm, lofty (in stature)” suggests that these mountains are hard, solid and tall or high in altitude. The word, “wholesome”, suggests pure and untouched by man. If the wisdom and power of Allah can do so much before our eyes, we therefore, cannot reject His teaching of a still more wonderful future life after death. Verses twenty-five to twenty-seven are in the past tense.

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