4. Teaching Iranian Culture in Persian Language Courses

During the week of 20 April 2011, three e-mails reached me, all on the subject of a University of Texas doctoral dissertation called “Is All Culture Learning Created Equal: Students’ Perceptions of Persian Language and Culture” (2009). Because the dissertation was written in a department of the School of Education and not in Persian Studies in UT’s Department of Middle Eastern Studies, I would not have heard about it without the e-mails, which accused the dissertation of exhibiting cultural illiteracy and abusing American Persian Studies programs.

Those bizarre assertions admittedly piqued my interest in the dissertation, but not as much as did the phrases “culture learning” and “student perceptions of Persian language and culture” in its title. For, it so happens that The University of Texas is home to more culture-based, instructional materials for the Persian language than any other university outside of Iran. Here follows list of those published materials, which have seen use in UT’s Second- and Third-year Persian courses and in other university and American government Persian programs.

1. *Reading Iran Reading Iranians: Second Edition Revised* (2002, 442p) lives up to its title in various ways in its 39 lesson modules built around authentic texts, including lesson modules on Iranian identity and Identity cards, the Americanization of Iranian culture, a conversation on Iranian art Iranian painting, the classic feature film *Qaysar* [Caesar], a one-act play, speeches by Iranian political leaders, Iranian nationality and the Persian language, and Bahais in Iran. An other textbook called *Persian Vocabulary Acquisition: Second Edition* (2003, 371p), designed as a self-study and classroom guide for advanced Persian students, contains 50 texts in the contexts of lessons which deal primarily with vocabulary acquisition and retention, those texts treating, among other subjects, the use of computers, Iranian history, Iranian media, the Iranian economy, and the Iran-Iraq war.

2. *Persian Listening* (2008, 478p) features, among its 103 lesson modules, fifteen lesson modules on popular Persian poems, ten lesson modules on popular Persian songs, seven lesson modules on Persian-language Iranian feature films, and one lesson module on a Persian-language Iranian documentary film. All songs, poems, and films appear as the subjects of textbook lessons because of their cultural content. Although many First-year, Second-year, and Third-year Persian courses make use of songs, poems, and films, only *Persian Listening* introduces them in the context of full-fledged listening lessons (e.g., the lessons on *Marmulak* [Lizard] and *Ezdevaj be Sabk-e Irani* [Marriage, Iranian Style] cover 44, 8.5.x11” pages of 30-32 lines each and treat religious expressions and expressions of politeness and deference in Iran, while addressing the variegated culture-specific content in the movies), and helping students to listen to and watch Persian features films more efficiently.

3. *Advanced Persian Reader* (2005, printed on demand) uses the Persian text of Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s controversial, autobiographical essay called *Sangi bar Guri* [A Stone on a Grave] in twenty lessons designed to improve student reading skills while engaging them in thinking and talking about contemporary Iranian culture. *Advanced Persian Reader* has served as a Third-year Persian course syllabus at The University of Texas, and has constituted one of three, Third-year Persian options. The other two are: Reading Persian Newspapers, which uses *Persian Newspaper Reader: Second Edition* (2000), and Reading Persian Fiction, which uses *Persian Fiction Reader: Second Edition* (2000). Citing likely low enrollments, the Department of Middle Eastern Studies decided not to offer Third-Year Persian in 2011-2012.

4. *Iranian Geography Syllabus*, a description of which appears on the Persian Courses page at PersepolisInstitute.org, served at The University of Texas for two years as the syllabus for Second-year Persian. Involving map exercises and reading an Iranian textbook on geography, the
three-skills intermediate/advanced Persian course focused exclusively on Iranian peoples, places, environments, and other aspects of Iranian culture.

5. Parts of Iranian Culture Syllabus, a description of which appears on the Persian Courses page at PersepolisInstitute.org, has served in First-, Second-, and Third-year Persian courses. Units on use of computers as a resource for Persian, Iranian history, Iranian cuisine, Iranian jokes, Iranian geography, Iranian postage stamps with culture-specific images, and the like in this 200-page classroom and self-study manual offer unprecedented textual vantage points from which students can learn about Iranian culture.

Curiously, “Is All Culture Learning Created Equal: Students’ Perceptions of Persian Language and Culture” does not review or engage any Persian language instructional materials. For example, it neither cites nor uses any of the items in the following bibliography which my colleagues and I bear in mind when we design new Persian language instructional materials.

• an unedited, partial, working bibliography of Persian instructional materials published since 1979


Despite many errors in the translation of English terms into Persian, a useful ancillary resource with its everyday topics sections and illustrations of 4,000+ words and expressions.


Printed on demand. Accompanied by two audio CDs with readings of all 20 text sections.


Presents 6,700+ English words with Persian equivalents and 8,300+ Persian words with English equivalents. Lacks a guide to word stress patterns, alphabetizes Persian words according to Latin transcription, and features many mistakes. A good Persian learner’s dictionary remains a desideratum.


Employs a grammar-translation method. Teaches literary/written Persian forms exclusively, even in sample dialogues and conversations. Presents non-authentic texts.


Exhibits no methodological underpinnings and contains no explanatory material or cultural content.


An intermediate advanced reader with exercises designed to improve newspaper reading skills.


An elementary guide to reading and vocabulary acquisition and maintenance.


For intermediate/advanced students. 25+ authentic texts, translations, glossary, language notes, and audio CD recordings.


For intermediate/advanced students. Uses authentic texts in its 70 lessons which describe essential features of literary/written and colloquial/spoken registers of the language.


For intermediate/advanced students. 40+ authentic texts, translations, glossary, language notes, and audio CD recordings.


For intermediate/advanced students. Accompanied by an audio CD with readings of all texts.


For intermediate/advanced students. Accompanied by an audio CD with readings of all texts.


A guide to reading, listening, and appreciation of grammar. Presents a programmed introduction to reading. Features authentic texts. Accompanied by an audio CD with readings of all texts.


The best available elementary guide, accompanied by two DVDs.


Concise, easy-to-read discussions of basic morphology and syntax.
The best grammar available.
A reference grammar by a linguist. Features unauthentic examples.
Twenty-four lessons and comprehensive Persian-English and English-Persian glossaries. Each lesson features a text, one or more grammar topics, a description of differences between colloquial and literary registers, and exercises which practice reading, listening, and speaking skills.
A multi-media, proficiency-based textbook designed for intensive, communicative learning settings.
Nurhan, Esmael, and Thomas E. Gouttiere. *Dari for Foreigners. Books 1 and 2*. Omaha, NE: Center for Afghanistan Studies at The University of Nebraska at Omaha, 198? (n.d.).
An orientalist perspective. Features authentic examples.


A basically audio-lingual guide with not error-free descriptions of culture and features of grammar.


Also curiously, the dissertation does not cite or use any of the voluminous, recent writing on Iranian culture, including cited materials originating and in use at The University of Texas. For example, here follows the bibliography for an undergraduate course offered every three or so years at The University of Texas.

*• an unedited Iranian culture course bibliography for students who cannot read Persian*


Hafez, Dance of Life. Illustrations by Hossein Zenderoudi. Calligraphy by A.A. Tabnak.


__________. "Manuchehri: Poet or Versifier?" Edebiyat 1 (1976): 93-110. A review article which discusses differences between Persian "verse" and Persian "poetry."


__________. "Translation as Interpretation: The Case of Ferdowsi's Rostam and Sohrâb." Iranshenasi 1, no. 3 (Fall 1989).


"Iran." Encyclopaedia Britannica.
Koran. Online at www.hti.umich.edu/koran. Best read through daily perusal of individual chapters, not necessarily in order, or self-contained sections of chapters.


_______. "Hafez..." Encyclopedia Iranica.


The fact that “Is All Culture Learning Created Equal: Students’ Perceptions of Persian Language and Culture” does not take into account Persian textbook writing or writing on Iranian culture does not strike me as particularly problematic because the dissertation deals with language
teaching methodology, the observation of student performance, and assessing student impressions, such foci constituting subjects of interest in the field of Foreign Language Education, presumably the primary audience for the dissertation. Accordingly, the dissertation’s bibliography suggests that the dissertation writer has no academic background in Persian Studies or Iranian Studies and that he/she could have produced the same results through the observation of and reporting on the reactions of foreign students of English to cultural content in English-as-a-second-language instructional materials. In other words, the bibliography highlights implementation of technology in the foreign language curriculum, internet-based learning, video-based curriculum, computer-assisted language instruction, films as a window to the target language and culture, telecollaborative foreign language study, use of dialogue journals, surfing to cross-cultural awareness, WebQuests, and PowerPoint presentations. Of course, had the dissertation writer taken a look at Persian language instructional materials produced in recent years at The University of Texas and also at the descriptions of language courses such as that for Elementary Persian Reading for Heritage Speakers of Persian, described on the Persian Courses page at PersepolisInstitute.org, he/she would have reached more accurate generalizations in writing about the current state of Persian language materials and instruction at American universities. For example, the syllabus for the cited Heritage Persian Course includes multiple units on computer use on the part of students learning Persian as well as four hands-on, lectures/demonstrations by computer experts natively fluent in Persian. Other Persian course descriptions, also on the Persian Courses page at PersepolisInstitute.org, illustrate how prominently videos, films, and online resources figure in intermediate and advanced Persian instruction in which I play a role. Regardless of all of this, the dissertation can give teachers of English ideas for updating their classroom activities and teachers of Persian useful references to writing about computer-assisted instruction worth considering in their teaching. At the same time, Persian language experts who read the dissertation for methodological insights may, like me, have anecdotal evidence contradicting the conclusions drawn from what they may find an atypical and quantitatively inadequate group of four students on whom the dissertation exclusively focuses. For example, having taught six or seven Advanced or Third-year Persian classes with enrollments up to 30 participants since 2000, I do not find familiar the dissertation’s reported data and conclusions. But that does not mean that the investigator designed his/her project incoherently or made methodological errors in its execution. For the dissertation writer apparently had no choice but to use the small group of four students who made up the only Third-year Persian course in the city where she was living when he/she reached the dissertation writing stage. Moreover, he/she presumably also had no choice but to base dissertation observations about teaching Persian and Iranian culture in tandem on the course description and implementation on the course which the dissertation writer observed and reported on. Here follows the description of the course in question as quoted in the dissertation. The dissertation does not state whether or not the dissertation writer also served as the course instructor.

Third-year Persian I Course Description. This advanced Persian language proficiency course is designed for students who have completed Second-year Persian II or its equivalent as well as students who have had exposure to Persian at this level and who pass a placement examination for PRS 312L. The material for this course will consist of prose and poetry, both classical and modern. The course aims to expand active vocabulary to approximately 1200 words by the end of the semester. Grammatical work focuses on complex grammatical constructions and demands increased accuracy in understanding and producing structures in paragraph-length discourse. Students should expect three hours of class preparation for each class hour. Although the texts will be supplemented with a glossary and explanations of culture-specific aspects of the text and idiomatic expressions, dictionary use is required. The reading material will also be made available in audio format. Daily homework assignments are corrected and discussed with students on a regular basis.
On the basis of this description, which does not identify specific listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills which its participants should bring to the course or specific skills which they exhibit upon successful completion of the course, readers have no reason to assume that it had any proficiency features. Apparently, the course offered students texts and glossaries, but no structured proficiency/performance lessons, a particularly relevant issue in using films as course texts. Also, the curious, stated goal of expansion of active vocabulary to 1200 words by the end of the course does not resonate with anyone experienced in instructional materials preparation for a Third-year or advanced Persian course, by which level instructors might expect students to have active control over a threshold reading vocabulary, which would amount to 4000+ lexical items, as in Basic Tajiki Word List (2003), compiled as a result of developing a corpus, such as that reflected in The Most Common Words in Farsi Persian (2012, in progress).

In fine, “Is All Culture Learning Created Equal: Students’ Perceptions of Persian Language and Culture” offers serviceable ideas to teachers of English as a second language, but no more. In other words, had a Persianist chaired the dissertation supervisory committee, a different dissertation would have resulted.