



Representing Religion and Resisting Secularism in English Language Textbooks: A Qualitative Study of Iranian Locally-Produced Textbooks

MEHDI DAVARI-TORSHIZI¹ and JACK DAVID ELLER^{2*}

¹Independent Scholar.

²Department of Anthropology, Woxsen University, Hyderabad, India.

Abstract

English language textbooks are sources of instruction but also of religious or secular enculturation. Research shows that global English language textbooks have focused on the neoliberalization of the target society and culture, especially majority-Muslim societies. Neoliberalization is also considered to be an attempt to un-Islamize or, as some scholars conceptualize it, secularize such societies in that it (supposedly) promotes Western values (e.g., celebrity culture, consumerism, etc.) In order to combat this so-called un-Islamization, Islamic countries began to produce local language textbooks for preserving Islamic thought. Exploring the how of Islamizing English language textbooks is still a significant area of research. This study aims to contribute to the related literature by qualitatively analyzing the content of Iranian locally-produced textbooks. “Strong Islamization” and “resisting un-Islamization” emerged as the main themes in the textbooks. The pros and cons of this strategy are discussed and a path for future research is also highlighted.



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Introduction

“English language teaching is a highly political project” (Pennycook and Coutand-Marin, 2003, p. 338), and not only because it embeds and perpetuates international hierarchies—English as an “imperial language” and America as a dominant culture—or because it reflects national goals and ambitions. English language teaching (ELT), like any social undertaking, entails decision-making,

specifically decisions about what language(s) will be taught, who will do the teaching, what instructional materials will be used, and what those materials will contain.

When the issue is religion, these decisions are particularly acute. The so-called secular settlement in the West holds that public spaces like schools, and therefore their instructional materials,

CONTACT Jack David Eller ✉ jdeller@bu.edu 📍 Department of Anthropology, Woxsen University, Hyderabad, India.



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should be “secular.” There is, of course, a vast literature on secularism and secularization which demonstrates, above all else, that the two concepts are distinct and that each takes multiple local forms—literally that there are numerous “formations of the secular” mostly premised on the state’s control and containment of religion (Asad 2003). In his reply to Asad, Casanova (2006) argues that secularization comprises three separate processes or theses—privatization of religion, differentiation or institutionalization of religion, and absolute decline of religiosity—with differentiation being the most consistent and successful outcome. However, not all states or societies abide by the secular settlement, allowing or encouraging religion in public spaces. Further, it is impossible to erase all traces of religion from cultural discourse and practice.

More fundamentally, language is always and inescapably value-laden. It is easy to ignore this fact when the ELT “source” (the society or country offering the instruction and writing the materials) is the same as the “target” (the society or country that the instruction and materials are about). Even then, we have witnessed struggles in places like the United States over curricula and textbooks in potentially controversial subjects such as history and science. But in all language-learning classes, texts, and exercises, certain cultural assumptions, often latent, are made and promoted, not least among them religious beliefs and values. For instance, readings and assignments may feature males and females conversing freely, depict interactions between races, ethnicities, and religions, and discuss or portray people dressed in certain ways and engaged in particular activities. It is not culturally or politically neutral to read about Dick and Jane playing together or playing with a dog or eating pork or beef.

The present article investigates ELT in Iran, specifically the textbooks that English language teachers use in schools and the content and representation of religion communicated therein. Interestingly, there is a considerable literature on Iranian, and general Muslim, ELT, including two Iranian journals dedicated to the subject, *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning* (<https://elt.tabrizu.ac.ir>) and *Journal of English Language Pedagogy and Practice* (<https://sanad.iau.ir/journal/jal>), both of which publish impressively scholarly and technical essays. However, while there has been

some investigation of Muslim and Iranian language textbooks, there has not been the intensive content analysis of religion provided here. That is odd and unfortunate, because, as Benham and Mozaheb opine, “Islam as a religion is an inseparable part of Iranian EFL [English as a foreign language] textbooks” (2013, p. 103), whether religion is taught explicitly or implicitly.

Religion and English Language Training

Predictably, most of the literature on religion and ELT is written about Christianity, primarily by Christians who, also predictably, by and large endorse religion in language learning. Indeed, in one of the three volumes co-edited by Wong and various colleagues, Wang-McGrath (2013, p. 31) emphasizes that “Christian missions have considered English Language Teaching (ELT) as a great opportunity for evangelization and have a history of using English education as an entryway to spread the gospel or be a witness.” In a more critical tone, Pennycook and Coutand-Marin remind us of projects like Summer Institute of Linguistics, which describes itself as “a global, faith-based nonprofit that works with local communities around the world to develop language solutions” (<https://www.sil.org/about>), not to mention Mission Finder.org, a clearinghouse for missionary opportunities in ELT such as International Messengers, committed to “evangelism in Europe and MENA countries (Middle East-North Africa) teaching English in a camp environment” (<https://missionfinder.org/organizations/international-messengers>). Not all religious insertion into ELT, of course, is so blatant. At any rate, Pennycook and Couland-Marin add that missionaries and evangelical churches may not be welcome on foreign soil, but English teachers and programs usually are.

Within this body of research, authors tend to concentrate on language teachers as opposed to students or materials used. In that regard, religion seeps into ELT not just through direct reference to beliefs and doctrines but through the motivations and methods of those teachers; prominent among these variables are love for their students, a sense of duty or “calling,” and a notion of teaching as “witness.” At the same time, there is admittedly some awareness of the problem of “self-reflexivity,” that is, recognizing and critiquing one’s own beliefs and practices, and of potential coercion of students.

These perspectives and problems are shared if not exacerbated in ELT in majority-Muslim settings, and frankly there has been much greater interest in teaching materials in studies of Islam and ELT. In the first decade of the 21st century, Akbari (2008, p. 646-7) argued that the concern for method in the field of ELT was in fact replaced by “an era of textbook-defined practice” because teachers, due to their heavy workload, happily welcome what textbooks with their teaching guides prescribe. Although English teachers are not textbook-bound, the role of ELT textbooks in shaping students’ worldviews is undeniable. Central to the ELT textbook are political and ideological regimes of representation aimed at constructing the world (Gray and Block, 2014). Indeed, students are enculturated and socialized in a particular way by language textbooks as ideological apparatuses (see Curdt-Christiansen, 2017).

Like their Christian counterparts, Muslim ELT instructors and theorists often see no problem with injecting religion into textbooks. Safritri, Jabu, and Samtidar (2023, 317) put it bluntly: “the teaching of English subject [sic] must consequently combine Islamic and regional values, particularly in Islamic based school.” In Indonesia, they find that the educational system expects teachers to develop students as *Insan Kamil* (intellectually, spiritually, and socially mature persons), for which religious training is essential. Language teachers may achieve this goal “by writing and/or using English course-books loaded with Islamic teaching,” as well as adopting or generating “authentic material that contains Islamic messages [and] English textbooks and supplementary materials focusing on Islamic teachings” (321). Rohmana (2020, p. 47) seconds this obligation: since the integration of Islam “into all subjects at school is urgently needed,” teachers should proceed by “inserting exercise with Islamic values in the English topics, using Islamic names for person, event or places, connecting the relevant verse of Holy Book or using it as the material to be translated and using English books containing Islamic messages.”

Inspecting Iranian textbooks more closely, Benham and Mozaheb (2013, p. 102) report that “in many dialogues, lexical items, and reading passages of these textbooks, religious customs were imbedded implicitly.” This applies as much to the situations and graphics presented in the texts as the verbal

portions. As for situations, they count only nine dialogues with both male and female characters, and in every case the characters were father/daughter or siblings. When images were included, females were modestly dressed in the Muslim fashion, and the sexes maintained their physical distance.

Unfortunately, there is a cost for this Islamic correctness. As Khodabandeh and Mombini (2018, p. 148) see it, by “adhering to the source culture” in Iranian ELT, the authors of textbooks “neglected to deal with target culture sufficiently, hence preventing learners to boost their intercultural communicative competence.” Derakhshan (2021, p. 2) concurs that the exclusive use of “local and national discourse and cultural representations” leads to the impoverishment of Iranian student’s “awareness of international cultural representations” and “intercultural competence.” This compels us to ponder what English language learning in Iran and other Muslim countries is for—and not for. Surely, knowledge of English is important for business and science; Rohmana (2020, p. 48) deems it a “practical” matter. At the same time, she is emphatic that, in Indonesia and elsewhere, the consequent “learning of Western values is not desired.” Likewise, Fitria (2023, p. 66) opines that Muslims should certainly master “the rules and procedures for using English properly and correctly,” but they should avoid “consciously or unconsciously embracing a foreign culture that is inherent in English.” In the end, English is a tool “for understanding the Qur’an, hadiths, and globalization” (p. 64), perhaps even to spread Islam into the English-speaking world.

Naturally, then, ELT textbooks have provided a battleground in which material developers and policymakers fight for either the promotion or omission of neoliberal, secular, and religious ideas. It is not surprising that the legitimation of neoliberal ideology in Muslim-majority countries brings with it a concomitant need for secularization of these countries. This has led to the so-called battle between the sacred and the secular in ELT as an ideological field. An extreme case of this battle comes from the crass idea that “good Muslims speak English” and therefore that Muslim extremism can be combated by exposing Muslims to English (Karmani, 2006). Again, it is obvious that ELT textbooks are an efficient means for achieving this purpose. To counter extremism in Bangladesh,

for example, secularization or de-Islamization of English textbooks is considered to be an effective solution. One example of this secular measure is the exclusion of references to “any principles, values, ideals, or personalities associated with Islam” in Bangladeshi ELT textbooks (Hamid and Ali, 2023, p. 845).

Most recently, Hamid’s (2024) study revealed somewhat similar results. He compared the content and pictures of Western ELT textbooks and localized Bangladeshi ELT textbooks and found that there are almost no references to the ideals of Islam in Western ones. To counter this secular measure, the English textbooks taught in the madrasa community were revised or, more precisely, Islamized mainly by means of “Photoshop engineering.” An unrealistic imposition of head covering, for example, on a Bangladeshi female singer was inserted. Hamid (2024, p. 752) considered this counteraction dangerous in that it is likely to convey the message that “Islam is all about covering heads.”

Research on Pakistani ELT textbooks highlights the existence of the same competition for control over religious and secular enculturation. Shah, Pardesi, and Memon (2024, p. 718), for instance, found that “the students’ [Islamic] aspirations conflict with the type of aspirations shaped under neoliberalism.” Celebrations of Christmas, singing, and dancing promoted in ELT textbooks were among the examples considered to be un-Islamic by students. On the other hand, localized language textbooks in Pakistan are, unsurprisingly, replete with Islamic ideology by, for example, overusing certain words such as “Allah,” “Prophet,” and “Qur’an” for a purposeful representation of the world (Lashari, Shah, and Memon, 2023).

Asomewhat similar strategy for resisting neoliberalism is used by Iranian ELT textbook developers, as Babaii’s (2022) content analysis revealed. She showed that locally-constructed ELT textbooks in Iran “try to avoid major tenets of neoliberalism, somehow to the extreme” in that neoliberal ideology is out of kilter with the Islamic Republic’s (IR) policies toward preserving Islam. For example, individualism and consumerism are strongly de-emphasized in these textbooks, and every attempt has been made to promote and cherish Islamic identity and values, to the extent that, for example, no trace of English-

speaking countries can be found in the textbooks. Therefore, like Hamid, Babaii too is critical of such strong essentialism in the Islamic ELT program and calls for a more realistic approach to developing textbooks.

Collectively, thus, ELT researchers are to take the following points into consideration, especially in their textbook analyses. First, they should not shy away from conducting research on religion and secularism in the field, since despite the significance of this area of research especially in the Muslim world, it is still in its infancy. Second, it is crucial to consider that modernization, neoliberalization, and secularization are interrelated and therefore the ignorance of secularization in the related research would distract us from the bigger picture. Third, thanks to the vast body of research on neoliberalism in almost all academic fields, we now know that its all-pervasive influence is undeniable. Therefore, it would be more beneficial for the field if researchers shift their focus onto the ways modernization, neoliberalization, and secularization affect students’ and teachers’ identities and worldviews and how policy-makers, material developers, and all players in the field are dealing with the whole issue. The current study tries to fill this gap and contribute to the related scarce literature. The next section explains how this will be achieved.

Materials and Methods

As the above discussion shows, researchers have mostly concentrated on the (critical) discourse/content analysis of ELT textbooks to see how neoliberalism is embraced or eschewed in the Muslim world. Very little attention has been paid to the analysis of English textbooks against the backdrop of secularization in Islamic contexts, where, importantly, secularism is conceptualized and takes place differently (Zuckerman and Shook, 2017). For example, the Western story of secularization, which is ordinarily told based on the separation of church and state, is not generalizable to Islamic countries (Davari-Torshizi, 2024). Indeed, it is unwise and rather simplistic to consider that modernization equals Westernization and then focus on a single story of secularization based on Christianity (Eller, 2022). Rather, as Eller aptly stated, multiple modernities and secularities are to be recognized, especially in the Muslim world where non-religion has become a thornier issue.

Accordingly, it is important to explore how the secularization process is perceived in the Islamic ELT program, particularly through material development. Specifically, it would be advantageous to examine what the material developers' and policy makers' position is on secularism. Also, it is extremely important to know what the repercussions of this position are for the Muslim world.

In response, this study aims to analyze the content of locally-constructed ELT textbooks and workbooks taught in Iranian public and private schools, specifically six books in the Prospect and Vision series. Published by the Iranian Ministry of Education, each series consists of three books, the first of which (Prospect) is intended for teenagers (12 to 15 years old) and the second (Vision) for 16- to 18-year-old students. There is also a workbook for every textbook.

Needless to say, the results of this analysis in a vacuum would not fully and directly contribute to the literature. Therefore, in order to shed useful light on the previously painted picture and to partly fill the huge lacuna in ELT research on secularism, the content of Iranian ELT textbooks will be compared with the content of other (non-)Western ELT textbooks to see, generally speaking, how the process of secularization, in relation to religion, is perceived by the ELT community in the Muslim world. Such cross-cultural analysis would be fruitful because previous research has mostly concentrated on a one-dimensional view of secularism.

A deductive thematic discourse analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) seemed to be suitable for this study because, due to the infancy of this area of research, it was necessary to see how secularism is conceptualized in the literature. It was based on this conceptualization that the content of said textbooks was analyzed. This approach, as Braun and Clarke suggested, allows the researcher to avoid an isolated analysis.

Fundamentally, it was evident that secularism is considered to be an opposing force aiming at de-Islamizing Muslim societies. Thus, this issue was taken into consideration for classifying the themes and patterns of religion and secularism. For example, it was found that the exclusion of religious names, hijab, and generally any Islamic references is linked

to secularization. It is of note that both textual and visual representations of religion and secularism were taken into consideration.

Accordingly, first, one of the authors (Davari-Torshizi) read both series of the textbooks and their workbooks in order to obtain the complete idea developed in them. The second round of reading the textbooks was for identifying the initial themes related to religion and secularism. Some examples of the words and phrases that suggested core themes were "chador," "manteau," and "scarf" and phrases like "celebrating a religious holiday" and "Islamic revolutionary anniversary." Moreover, in contrast to global English textbooks, there were no pictures of girls or women without hijab in the analyzed textbooks. This total absence of references to what is considered to be secular in the related literature was, for example, labelled as "strong Islamization." The third step was the modification and development of the preliminary themes identified in the previous step (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The final step was the comparison of the emergent themes with the concepts of religion and secularism as they are understood in other similar analyses. This comparison was necessary because religion and secularism are not similarly treated in each context.

Like texts, images are not neutral (Fairclough, 2003). They helped the authors better understand the process of religious and secular enculturation in the textbooks. Accordingly, the religious and secular messages that the images conveyed were considered and added to the above textual analysis.

Results

It is not surprising that, by putting strong emphasis on the promotion of "more English and less Islam" and the call for "cutbacks in the amount of religion" taught in the educational sphere from Western countries (Karmani, 2005b, p. 741), "most scholars tend to see secularism as being opposed to religion, and at the same time see religious fundamentalism as being opposed to secularism" (Barnawi, 2018, p. 27). It is inevitably believed that "the goal of secularizing education and ELT can be linked to de-Islamization" (Hamid and Ali, 2023, p. 841). It is also believed that secularism promotes "worldliness without regard for religious or spiritual concerns" (Hamid, 2024, p. 745). In essence, the elimination of any basic form of Islamic thought, particularly from

the ELT textbook, is linked to secularism especially in countries like Iran in which “the everyday life of an ordinary Iranian citizen is governed by religious do’s and don’ts” (Babaii, 2022, p. 3).

Accordingly, it can be implied that the concept of secularism in the related literature is linked to the separation of religion (here Islam) from the state or the privatization of religion in general and to a worldly, un-Islamic, non-religious, and non-spiritual attitude toward life in particular. The following themes emerged based on this rather limited conceptualization of religion and secularism in the field of ELT. The unintended consequences of this treatment and a broader understanding of these concepts will be discussed in the final section.

Strong Islamization

Strong Islamization is the first core theme that emerged from the data. It generally refers to the promotion of Islamic beliefs and values in every way possible. In the forewords to all six textbooks, it is stated that all English-for-schools books have been basically developed with regard to Islamic identity and values, and all teachers are encouraged to pursue this objective. Unsurprisingly, then, strong Islamization of the textbooks was easily observable. This is achieved through the promotion of the “Islamic dress code,” “martyrdom,” and “Islamic English” explained below as subthemes.

Islamic Dress Code

From the very beginning, through ELT, students are taught what types of clothing are appropriate according to Islam. For example, in the first book Prospect 1 (p. 29), the words “chador,” “manteau,” and “scarf” with their pictures are featured. In the workbook of Prospect 1, there are some exercises for learning these words. For example, students should learn their spelling and be able to find them in a short reading passage. In teaching students how to use a possessive apostrophe, these items of clothing have been linked to foreign names, e.g., Kate’s scarf (Prospect 3, p. 36). In the related workbook, too, students have been asked to correct the mistakes in the following text:

This is Mrs. Kress. She is Paul wife. She is stand at a gift shop. The door the shop is not open. Mrs. Kress wearing a scarf and a manteau. She

wants to buy some gifts for her family (Prospect 3, workbook, p. 28).

While foreign names rarely appear in all six textbooks, here, in testing students’ use of the possessive apostrophe and other structures, Islamic clothing has been linked to a foreign family.

All female characters in the textbooks are mostly wearing a manteau and a scarf. Whatever the topic of teaching (traveling, shopping, hobbies, abilities, etc.), women and girls are pictured with the same clothes. As for men, they are dressed either in a shirt and pants or formal suits without a tie or bow. The topic of clothing is only covered in Prospect 3 with no basic vocabulary for clothes such as “jeans,” “blouse,” “skirt,” etc. In fact, the majority of pictures for different topics depict the school environment. For example, in Prospect 3 (p. 50), two girls in their school uniform are having a conversation about the New Year holidays. Another example is on page 34 of Prospect 2 where a male student is talking to his teacher in front of the classroom about having a headache. These conversations could be accompanied by, for example, a picture of a hospital or a public place where Iranians may go for New Year holidays. Even a cursory inspection of all six textbooks shows that what students are mostly exposed to is the school environment.

Predictably, absolute Islamization is likely to provide weird examples. On page 22 of Vision 3, the word “lap” is in red for students to learn. The sentence is: “My little sister sits on my mother’s lap all the time,” above which there is a picture of a mother with a female toddler on her lap. Weirdly, the toddler’s head has been covered with a scarf using Photoshop! In real life, even fervent Muslim believers rarely dress their girls in the scarf at that age.

Martyrdom

Martyrdom is one of the important Islamic values which most of the analyzed textbooks try to cherish and foster directly or indirectly. The word “martyrdom” first appears in the workbook of Prospect 2 (p. 29). A short passage in Persian has been written for students to find the English equivalents of some of its words. The passage is about Khorramshahr, one of the cities in which Iran and Iraq fought pitched battles after the Iraqi invasion of Iran. The first sentence

includes the words “martyrdom” and “bravery” with their Persian translations. The next direct reference is the word “martyrs” in the photo dictionary on page 121 of Prospect 3. Here, there is a picture in which some men and women are putting flowers on the graves of martyrs under which the phrase “commemorate Nuclear Energy martyrs” has been written. Relatedly, in this photo dictionary, a picture of an Iranian soldier at war with the sentence “a brave soldier” (p. 113) has been provided for students to learn the adjective “brave.”

Also, the word *shahid* as the Persian equivalent of “martyr” has been used in teaching students how to write addresses and people’s names. For example, in the workbook of Prospect 1 (p. 34, 38), students are required to write the first and last names of a few Iranian martyrs, and on pages 55 and 58 students are asked to circle and translate the word *shahid* in three exercises. Along with other Islamic and revolutionary values, martyrdom is further promoted in multiple parts of the textbooks. Examples are the phrases “celebrating a religious holiday,” “watching military parade,” “Islamic-Iranian culture,” and “Islamic revolutionary anniversary” in the photo dictionary of Prospect 3 (pp. 120-1). Other examples are in the workbook of Prospect 1 (p. 41) where students are required to write the date of, for instance, the Islamic Republic Day, Student Day (when three students were killed for protesting the official visit of the vice president of the US in 1953), Sacred Defense Week (the annual commemoration of the Iran-Iraq war), and Liberation of Khorramshahr.

It is reasonable to deduce that discussions on the concept of martyrdom are highly likely to be held in the classroom. Undoubtedly, teachers have to learn about the biographies of the martyrs and their life stories. They would discuss martyrdom either at teachers’ urging or at students’ request. What may also help the promotion of martyrdom by the textbooks and workbooks is the ubiquity of patriotic texts and photos. For example, for teaching the noun “love,” the phrase “love of country” has been written under the IR’s flag (Vision 1, p. 35). In a lesson on “festivals and ceremonies” in Prospect 3, the phrases “sing the national anthem” and “hold a ceremony” have been written under the pictures of IR’s soccer team bearing the flag and the pictures of a crowd of both male and female students waving the flag (p. 52, 119).

Islamic English

Islamic thought is generally promoted through English in all textbooks. The first textbook begins with a picture of a shrine and the Qur’an. In the second textbook, “recite the Holy Quran” is a phrase that students are required to learn to talk about their abilities. In this textbook, the words “shrine,” “mosque,” and “minaret” are provided for students to talk about places in a city. In its workbook, too, students are asked to write the names of some people who are “good at reciting the Holy Qur’an” (p. 13) and of shrines and mosques in their cities for introducing them to a traveler (p. 27). The primary purpose of the third textbook is to teach students the simple present tense. On page 57, students are asked to find and underline this tense in a passage about a religious ceremony which includes the words “religious,” “Muslim,” “fast,” and “prayer.” In its workbook, relatedly, students are asked to write some sentences about an Islamic-Iranian festival or ceremony. The one that the workbook suggests is another famous religious ceremony (p. 50).

There are textual and visual references to religious words and concepts such as “Allah,” “prophet,” “pilgrim,” “shrine,” “the Qur’an,” “Islam,” “Muslim,” “religious,” and “holy” throughout the textbooks and workbooks (e.g., Vision 1, p. 82, 101, 105, 106; Vision 2, p. 15; Vision 3, p. 29). These references are mostly made for the purpose of teaching English, for example, teaching grammar. However, it is obvious that the topics have been purposefully selected. For instance, the past continuous tense is taught in a text about an Iranian female translator of the Qur’an (Vision 1, p. 82). Collectively, it is evident that English is used for promoting Islamic thought in many parts of the textbooks and their workbooks.

2. Resisting un-Islamization

The second core theme that emerged from the dataset is “resisting un-Islamization.” It refers to the ways by which textbooks try to combat un-Islamization. Un-Islamization may have different meanings in different contexts, particularly with regard to the religious policies employed in that context. For example, although religious diversity exists in Iran, religious pluralism takes a very limited form (Davari-Torshizi, 2014) and the development of rival religions is not tolerated in this country (Richardson, 2014). Such “denial of religious

diversity” could be seen as a strategy to prevent un-Islamization or the decline of Islam. “Exclusion of so-called secular topics” from ELT textbooks could be regarded as another similar strategy. These strategies as subthemes of “resisting un-Islamization” are explained below.

Denial of Religious Diversity

There are many religions in the world among which Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Buddhism are conventionally known as world religions. These religions have many elements in common regarding religious beliefs and practices. It is inevitable that individuals in every society would communicate (personally or online) with believers of these religions in that, as Davari-Torshizi (2024) notes, “the mass exodus to the virtual world, the great waves of immigration, and generally the process of globalization opened the window into other religious worlds and provided individuals with many religious options.”

Notwithstanding these important facts, it was found that religious diversity is strongly de-emphasized in all textbooks and their workbooks. There is only one reference to the word “church” and its photo in Prospect 2 (p. 81). This word, however, does not appear in any text or exercise. There are also two references to the word “Christ” in the footnotes of Vision 3 (p. 29, 71) only for explaining what AD and BC stand for. In fact, no textual or visual trace of other religions is found in the book series.

It is of note that, at times, some other cultures are introduced in the textbooks. For example, there is a short passage about one of Korea’s holidays in the workbook of Prospect 3 (p. 48). In Vision 1 (p. 61), students are asked to listen to a conversation about a trip to Japan in which this country’s cultural features are highlighted to some extent. Also, there is a picture of Japanese architecture below this conversation. Later in this textbook (p. 102), other Asian cultural symbols are highlighted by referring to the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal. In a passage entitled “Iran: A True Paradise,” there are references to the pyramids, the beauty of France, Italy, and Spain, and Brazil’s, Peru’s, and Chile’s “ancient history and amazing nature” (Vision 1, p. 105). However, no religio-cultural aspect of these countries is mentioned.

One might rightly argue that the overemphasis on religious topics in ELT textbooks is not natural. What the findings suggest, however, is the need for a balanced representation of religio-cultural aspects of other, at least, Asian countries especially when, for example, Turkey’s religious culture, as a non-Iranian culture, is directly or indirectly referred to in the textbooks (e.g., Prospect 3, p. 57).

Exclusion of (so-called) Secular Topics

As was mentioned, secularization equals un-Islamization in the related literature; therefore, the exclusion of any secular topic from the textbooks was predictable. The next section discusses whether this conceptualization of secularism is acceptable. Regardless of this issue and based on the existing definition of secularism, it was found that some (so-called) secular topics are not covered in the analyzed textbooks while they are part and parcel of almost all international and some locally-developed ELT textbooks.

Lesson 3 of Vision 2 (p. 83) is about the important topic of “art and culture.” It is very admirable that Iranian carpet weaving, pottery, tilework, painting, and calligraphy are introduced to students, and the making and selling of these products are appreciated in the reading passages (p. 90). Later, this lesson also highlights the positive effects of art on one’s life in another passage (p. 107). Nevertheless, music, as an important topic covered in almost all ELT textbooks, is only mentioned in one sentence, for teaching modals: “You (shouldn’t/cannot) listen to loud music. It hurts your ears” (Vision 1, p. 109). It is common practice to teach English through songs specially designed for ELT textbooks. Lyrics are also a rich source of vocabulary for upper levels. Moreover, it is undeniable that new generations eagerly consume different genres of music in different languages. But it is reasonable to deduce that this topic is considered to be non-Islamic or supposedly secular by textbook developers and policymakers. For one thing, no musical instrument has appeared on IR’s national TV since the revolution while, at least, Iranian traditional music is very much alive in the country and is greatly appreciated around the world, and therefore students are undoubtedly familiar with it, let alone Iranian pop music.

The absence of other non-Islamic topics such as "holding parties," "pet-keeping," and "communication with the opposite gender" is evident in both series. As for holding parties, for example, only "birthday" is referred to in Prospect 1 (p. 16) where a teacher is asking her students to tell when their birthday is and how old they are. Celebration, too, is mostly linked to religious or traditional ceremonies.

Admirably, there are reading passages about endangered and farm animals in the textbooks. However, there is no reference to the word "pet," and no relevant topic is covered in either series. Keeping pets, especially dogs, at home is discouraged in Islam. Students are highly likely to learn this cultural item both in real life and in English classes. For example, the whole series of Super Minds textbooks taught in Iranian private language institutes (Farsani & Rahimi, 2022) is based on the adventurous journey of a girl and a boy and their dog.

IR's educational system is segregated specifically up to the time when students enter universities. As was mentioned, both series mainly depict the school environment, and most conversations take place in the classroom. In these conversations, no communication between opposite genders can be seen. Female students only interact with other female students or with their female teachers and vice versa.

Conclusion

This article, which systematically examines the two main series of Iranian ELT textbooks, demonstrates that acquisition of English language skill is explicitly and energetically combined with Islamization and resistance to un-Islamization generally and secularism and neoliberalism specifically. Indeed, this is not merely a matter of preventing too much knowledge of the West but even of cultural and religious diversity within the local state; Benham and Mozaheb (2013, p. 103) warn that textbook writers and teachers "should be cautious about overemphasizing minority groups, which may consequently endanger a sense of nationhood."

More broadly, the research urges scholars to be alert to tacit as well as manifest cultural messages in textbooks and other language-learning resources.

When writers and teachers believe that their lessons are culturally neutral, they may be ignoring or dismissing embedded cultural or religious knowledge and values. This issue cuts both ways: promoters of religion may deny or exploit the proselytizing potential of their materials, and those who would teach a foreign language like English while presumably negating the cultural information or values carried by that language may either disregard the impossibility of such a plan or, alternatively, fail to teach the language in a way that is cross-culturally useful.

Finally, the current research contributes to a broad and inclusive effort that explores not just written and graphic materials but teachers, teacher training institutions, classroom pedagogies, and student reception. It should also recognize the many variables in the field of ELT, including English speakers teaching English in majority-English (e.g., ESL) and non-majority-English contexts, non-Westerners (often with imperfect fluency) teaching English in their own countries, and the difference between official (state-approved/mandated) and unofficial (e.g., private companies and organizations) ELT classes, among the latter Christian missionaries teaching English for purposes of conversion.

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Author Contributions

- **Mehdi Davari-Torshizi:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection and Analysis

- **Jack David Eller:** Contextualization, Literature Review, Final Preparation

Clinical Trial Registration

This research does not involve any clinical trials.

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