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## **READING POETRY IN STANDARDIZED EFL TEST PREPARATION TO INCREASE MEANINGFUL LITERACY ENGAGEMENT**

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This article reports the process of an action research project on the impact of reading poetry on student literacy engagement in an EFL standardized test preparation course. This research project was conducted in a class of eight female Iranian adult professionals preparing for the First Certificate of English (FCE) examination, provided by Cambridge English Language Assessment. Standardized tests are believed to narrow the curriculum, to reduce emphasis on complex thinking, and to have “washback” effect on the quality of teaching. In this project, in order to improve the quality of the students’ literacy engagement two particular measures were taken. In the first cycle of action, the class chose to switch from skills-based preparation textbooks to a textbook written with a communicative view of language learning. Each unit in this textbook was organized based on a socially sensitive issue to encourage the students to practice the linguistic skills required for the test in a meaningful context. In the second cycle, as an introduction to the lesson, the students read a Shakespearian sonnet which echoed the main theme of the unit. As a result of these measures, two significant changes occurred. First, there was a noticeable increase in the students’ authentic linguistic engagement. Second, the students took control of the content discussed in class and connected their conversations to their own beliefs, identities, and backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Standardized testing, EFL test preparation, Washback, Literacy engagement.

### **Introduction**

This article is a report of an action research project that explored the impact of including poetry in standardized English test preparation lessons on students’ literacy engagement and linguistic productivity. In this project, in order to replace a skills-based approach to test preparation with strategies that encourage students to have more authentic interactions with the English language two forms of action were taken. In the first cycle of action, the class chose to switch from skills-based preparation textbooks to a textbook written with a communicative view of language learning. Second, we started studying some of the units of the book with classical English poetry instead of the introductions offered by the book. As a result of these measures, two significant changes occurred. First, there was a noticeable increase in the students’ authentic linguistic engagement. Second, the students took control of the content discussed in class and connected their conversations to their own beliefs identities, and backgrounds.

Standardized ESL and EFL tests, such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and tests provided by Cambridge English Language Assessment (previously Cambridge ESOL Examinations), constitute a sizable industry that authorizes international students to enter post-secondary

education in English speaking countries. Nevertheless, similar to standardized literacy tests in mainstream schooling, standardized ESL and EFL tests for English learners have received some criticism. These tests are believed to narrow the curriculum (Cooley, 1991), to reduce emphasis on complex thinking (M. L. Smith, 1989), and to have “washback” effect on the quality of teaching (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Alderson & Wall, 1993).

Since the 1980s, there has been a sense of urgency in different fields of literacy studies to broaden the definition of “literacy” in order to include students’ identities, prior knowledge, non-linguistic literacies, and sociocultural backgrounds in the process of literacy teaching and learning (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, & et al, 1996; Gee, 2001; Heath, 1983; Heath & Street, 2008; Simon, 2011; Street, 1993). Among second language teaching methodologies, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Harmer, 1982; O’Donnell, 2009) and Dogme language teaching (Meddings, 2009) share characteristics with recently developed theoretical frameworks in the field of literacy more than any other methodology because of their focus on relevance, engagement, authentic teaching materials, student voice, and critical use of curricula.

Employing the critical potentials of CLT and Dogme theory, this research project attempted to create meaningful interaction between students and the content of learning by replacing the anticipatory sets of the units of a Cambridge First Certificate in English Examination textbook with English poetry. The findings from this study show how the participating students, all Persian adult professionals, as a result of their interaction with poetry, displayed a dramatic increase in their engagement with the lessons and in the amount and quality of their oral and written communication with the teacher and their peers.

## **Literature Review**

Standardized testing has often been a bone of contention. Scholarly conversations in literature on student assessment reflect serious skepticism about the reliability of standardized tests and expresses concern about the negative impact of standardized testing on students’ learning and academic growth (Allison, Haas, & Haladyna, 1998; Gipps, 2012; Haney, 1981; Sacks, 1999; M. L. Smith, 1989). Similarly, in bilingual and second language education, there has been some academic disquietude about the impact of centrally designed curricula and standardized testing on English language learners, particularly in more politically charged and more publicized cases such as the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States (Abedi, 2007).

Although in comparison with discussions about testing and assessment in mainstream schools and public educational structures, standardized EFL testing (evaluation of English language learners in non-English speaking countries) has not received much attention, some scholars have also expressed doubts about the reliability of these tests, their problematic nature, and the ethical considerations regarding the identities of students who take these exams (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Alderson & Wall, 1993; Green, 2007; Hamp-Lyons, 1998). These tests are believed to narrow the curriculum (Cooley, 1991), to reduce emphasis on complex thinking (M. L. Smith, 1989), and to have “washback” effect on the quality of teaching (Green, 2007). “Washback effect,” in particular, has been the focus of much debate in literature about standardized language testing. Washback in applied linguistics “refers to the influence of language testing on teaching and learning” (Cheng, Watanabe, & Curtis, 2004, p. xiii).

The negative impact of high-risk standardized tests on teachers and students can also be approached from other frameworks available in literature. In ESL and EFL test preparation classes, due to narrowly defined expectations of standardized tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, and

Cambridge English Language Assessment examinations, there remains very little room for students' cultures (Kramsch, 1991; Lange & Paige, 2003; Prodromou, 1992; Valdes, 1986), their identities (Clots-Figueras & Masella, 2013; Hirst, 2007; Kubota & Lin, 2009; Nero, 2005; Potowski, 2010; Wodak, 2012), and their prior knowledge (Carrell & Wise, 1998; Gibbons, 2002). Over the past decades, the field of literacy studies has undergone a sociocultural paradigm change that emphasizes the situatedness of literacy learning and teaching (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Cazden et al., 1996; Gee, 2001; Heath, 1983; Heath & Street, 2008; Simon, 2011; Street, 1993). This shift to regarding literacy as a phenomenon embedded in sociocultural circumstances has also influenced second language learning (Cummins, 2009). The views reflected in the theoretical network illustrated above make thinking about the importance of students' identities and backgrounds in any educational process worthwhile, even in an EFL test preparation class usually held for most immediate practical matters and in most commercial settings.

One possible way to maximize the number of contact points between a new language and students' identities, backgrounds, and cultures is discussing the literary works written in the language students are learning. The hermeneutic possibilities of literary texts can invite students to approach them in a very subjective manner and thus to invest their identities in the process of learning. Scholarly literature hosts voices that recommend using literary works in ESL and EFL classes (Fitzgerald, 1993; Khatib, M., & Nourzadeh, S., 2011; Langer, 1997; Porter, 2000; Spack, 1985). In harmony with CLT and Dogme theory, these scholars hold that language learning is a holistic phenomenon that occurs when students experience organic interaction with authentic linguistic situations. Literary works, for instance, invite students to engage with language in a meaningful manner thanks to their linguistic richness and their potentials for exchanging genuine human experiences that can connect with students from different backgrounds. (Spack, 1985) has explained why teaching literary works in additional language classes was worthwhile:

[L]iterature, with its extensive and connotative vocabulary and its complex syntax, can expand all language skills (Povey 1967). Likewise, the cultural benefits of studying literature are hard to ignore, since literature mirrors national culture (Harris and Harris 1967a, 1967b) and can therefore acquaint students with the aesthetic, moral, and spiritual values of the nation and the rules of the social system (C. Scott 1965, Adeyanju 1978). Even in countries where English is learned primarily for practical communication or for specific purposes rather than for general education, literature in English--including non-native English literature (see Sridhar 1982)--can play an important role. Because literature expresses both cultural values and universal human values, its study can promote internal as well as international communication among all English-speaking peoples (Marckwardt 1978). (p. 705)

Among different literary forms, use of poetry in ESL and EFL classes has particularly attracted a lot of attention. This attention is not accidental:

[P]oetry is an ideal entry into language learning for ESL students because of its rhythm, repetition, and rhyme. Through the listening to, reading, and rereading of poetry, students can increase their exposure to language, and the brevity and short lines of poetry appear both manageable and not so intimidating to ESL students." (Vardell, Hadaway, & Young, 2002, p. 51)

Thus, the potential of poetry for literacy engagement is a recognized phenomenon. Practitioners have employed poetry in ESL, EFL, and other additional language learning settings in order to increase literacy engagement (Adra, 2004; Leon, 2011; A. M. Smith, 2010). Some teachers have invited students to read poetry in the new language they are learning (Vardell et al., 2002), some have asked their students to write poetry in the additional language they are adopting (Hanauer, 2012; Taiwo, 2013), and some have helped students create dual language texts (Cummins & Early, 2011; Soltero, 2004). Also, some researchers have examined the impact of poetry on professional development (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2008; Wald, 2011). This article specifically focuses on the impact of reading English poetry on literacy engagement in standardized EFL test preparation classes, which has practically remained untouched in the academic conversation described above. The present paper is a report on an action research project that attempted to address this gap in literature.

## **Methods**

The methodological approach adopted for this inquiry was action research (Costello, 2003; McNiff, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Following the traditions of action research in education, the methodology employed in this project had two main characteristics. First, it was a reflective process of practice that married “action and reflection, theory and practice.” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 11). Second, it was participatory in nature (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) and facilitated the involvement of the participants and myself (both as their teacher and as a practitioner researcher) in intervening in the process of learning by changing pedagogical procedures.

Action research, in an educational setting, is the intervention of teachers and students in the process of teaching and learning in order to solve a problem, increase efficiency, or create a positive change in the normal condition of affairs, which may not be sufficiently satisfactory. Action research can be conducted in different numbers of cycles of intervention, each including the following steps: (1) planning, (2) action, (3) observation, and (4) reflection (in preparation for the next cycle).

Following the classical norms of action research in education, I tried to increase the literacy engagement of a group of adult Persian students in one of my EFL standardized preparation classes in this project. This action research, as will be explained in detail, occurred in two cycles. It should be emphasized that adopting action research for this project, more than a technical methodological choice, was a necessity that organically formed out my desire to help my students interact with the English language in a meaningful manner even in test preparation, a traditionally skills-based pedagogical situation.

## **Site of Research**

The test preparation class in question was held in the language laboratory of a heart hospital in the north of Tehran, the capital of Iran. Greater Tehran has a population of 17 million people, at least thirty percent of whom are actively learning English. English learners in Tehran, thus, constitute a large market which is a constant target for international organizations offering EFL standardized tests such as the British Council in Iran. These tests in Tehran are regularly taken by many adult professionals who need proof of English fluency for vocational promotion and university students who wish to continue their studies abroad in English speaking countries. The



majority of these test takers in Tehran are prepared for the examinations by chain language schools that Iranian private corporations run. The language schools usually offer inflexible centralized curricula that attempt to drill test takers in intensive courses. Despite the fact that these chain language schools devour the largest share of the test preparation market, their uncreative blanket approach to helping students with preparation for the tests has opened space for the activity of the instructors of smaller language schools and independent teachers who tailor services to the specific needs of different students. I, as the instructor of the class reported in this article, belonged to the latter group.

In this context, in 2005 in Tehran, the training department of the hospital asked me to prepare a group of physicians for the First Certificate in English (FCE), an English language examination provided by Cambridge English Language Assessment. Before I received the request for an FCE preparation class, I had been teaching general English classes to different groups of hospital staff for a while, including the medical doctors who had decided to take the FCE examination. Although the curricula that I taught in that hospital were broadly outlined and discussed upon initial agreement with the hospital authorities, I had the freedom to alter and modify the curricula based on the requirements of the students or because of my pedagogical choices as the facilitator of the class. Language learning and teaching in this atmosphere was a collective attempt to maximize the engagement of the students. Hence, the ambiance was ready for different forms of action to improve the quality of teaching. The research project discussed in this article was embarked upon in this environment.

### **Participants**

The participants in this action research project were eight female Iranians who joined my Cambridge FCE test preparation class in a hospital in Tehran. All the participants were professional cardiologists between the ages of 35 and 45. They all practiced cardiology in the hospital where our classes were regularly held. The participants needed to take the English standardized test for a variety of different professional and educational purposes. Although the participants took the examination and the preparation course seriously, the sense of urgency to pass the examination, however, was considerably less than university students (typically preparing for TOEFL) who were seeking university admissions in English speaking countries and the Iranians who were planning to immigrate to Western countries, most frequently Canada (typically preparing for IELTS).

Having to deal with English medical textbooks in their professional lives as doctors, the participants' command of English would allow upper-intermediate to advance reading comprehension, yet they were not as equipped when it came to writing, listening, and speaking, which constitute a considerable proportion of the FCE Cambridge examination.

I had been teaching general English to this group for six months before this action research, and a focus on test preparation happened as an organic accommodation of the newly arisen needs of the students. As a result, the students were quite familiar with my pedagogical tendencies and teaching philosophy. Also, we had successfully established a very good rapport. Thus, the atmosphere of the class would welcome any pedagogical experiments that might have a positive change such as the one framed as the action research project reported in this article.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

During this action research three different forms of data were collected for (1) informing the next steps of the project and (2) the final analysis. First, memos, diary entries, and annotated lesson plans were created and collected in order to record the process of my planning for action and the post-action reflection. Second, textbooks, book pages, handouts, and student writing that could physically display the textual interactions of the students were collected. Third, accounts of the literacy engagement of students were recorded through observations of students' activities and also by taking notes of students' conversations.

"Literacy engagement," in the process of this project, was regarded as two different forms of student investment in the process of language learning; first, the performance of four main linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) of the students and examples of the manifestation of these skills such as grammatical knowledge and active vocabulary; second, the time the students spent on authentic issues that connected to their lives as Iranian female professionals, and the manner of engagement, as a result of the impact of reading poetry in our test preparation class. These issues, for example, included feminism and ideological critiques of poetry written in the students' first language, Persian.

Because of my full participation, as a teacher, in the activities during the class hours, all forms of data collection happened before the class or immediately after it. However, note taking of students' important comments happened during the process of teaching. The data was analyzed in two steps: (1) between the first cycle and the second cycle and (2) at the end of the project to reflect systemically on the outcome of the actions taken.

### **Cycle 1**

This section of the article describes how my students and I explored available EFL test preparation textbooks in order to find a book written with a communicative mentality. In Cycle 1, after an explanation of what motivated the class to search for a book with a more contextualized content, I will illustrate the changes caused by this action in regards with the students' literary engagement.

### **Problem**

Our Cambridge FCE preparation class was an offshoot of a general English course that I had been teaching to the same physicians. The change of the content of the course occurred as a result of the request of six of the students who planned to take the FCE examination and needed assistance in preparation for the test. The students, thus, were already accustomed to my teaching methodology and philosophy. My main approach to the general English course, before the test preparation class, was mainly Communicative Language Teaching, Tasked-Based Instruction, and Dogme language teaching. Consistent with these methodologies, our class was student-centered with as little teacher interference as possible, and the students interacted with language by performing different activities. Accordingly, most of language learning in our class happened in contextually rich activities often designed to connect to the students' interests, prior knowledge, and particularly professional life as cardiologists.

Nevertheless, a sudden switch to focusing on a standardized test in our class would inevitably create a pedagogical change that most of the students and I did not find pleasant. Following the dominant trends of teaching EFL standardized tests in Tehran (which in my

experience are very much similar to North American trends), the students who were planning to take the examination suggested that we use skills-based preparation textbooks. A few examples of these books would include *Barron's IELTS: International Language Testing System* (Lougheed, 2010) and *Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL Test* (Phillips, 2005). Searching in the same family of books, the students decided to embark on studying *First Certificate Gold Exam Maximiser* (Acklam & Burgess, 1996) and I followed suite. Using this textbook, however, created its own challenges.

The textbook in question was designed to have students intensively drill a large number of skills. As a result, the chapters were context reduced and were basically made of a variety of quizzes modelled on the actual FCE examinations. The introductions, instructions, and explanations, which appeared from time to time at the beginning or at the end of exercises, were also—for the instrumental purpose of swiftly leading the students to the questions—shrunk to a degree that they would not connect to the students' backgrounds and prior knowledge. As a consequence of this manner of structuring the book, the students' voices and identities almost disappeared from the process of teaching and learning in our class, which was in sharp contrast to the students' experiences with the communicative general English course that we had had before and that the students had grown accustomed to. The students, who practically led the discussions in the previously communicative classes in heated conversations, now had to drill in silence and my job as an instructor was reduced to checking and correcting the students' errors when required.

After a couple of sessions the students started to complain about the textbook. Our new textbook, they believed, had closed their usual channels of expression. I also felt that our new approach had dramatically reduced students' literacy engagement. The lack of genuine interaction with the textbook had such an impact that not only the students' opinions, voices, and identities were almost absent from the class, but also the students, although mature and practical, could hardly follow the instructions of the book even for the pragmatic reason of passing the test. We decided to take action.

### **Action**

Thanks to previous teaching experience, I was familiar with another species of EFL standardized textbooks with a more communicative bent. The units of these textbooks were organized based on themes connected to real life experiences rather than skills—themes like “the environment,” “money,” or “relationships.” These textbooks embedded the skills required to pass a test like FCE in linguistic situations, where students were encouraged to express an opinion or assert a belief. A book in this category of publications could help my students maintain their interest in the subject of conversation and at the same time drill skills to prepare for the test.

According to these considerations, we decided to focus on a textbook called *New First Certificate Masterclass: Student's Book* (Haines & Stewart, 1996). This textbook had a useful selection of themes that might engage adult professional English learners such as the physicians that I was teaching. We, for example, could talk about “old habits,” “the future of the world,” “the rich and famous,” “dreams” and “a woman's place” in society, the central themes of some of the book units. The book, moreover, would address the skills my students needed to take the FCE test, specifically in their case: grammar usage and a variety of different forms of writing.



## Outcome

The use of FCE Masterclass textbook changed the atmosphere of the class. Most significantly, it created conversations that created space for students' opinions, concerns and prior knowledge of the world. These conversations, at the same time, let the students have more organic interactions with the English language while they focused on the skills required for the FCE examination. In other words, students now read, listened, and wrote in English not merely for the sake of a test, but because they had taken a stance on a genuine human issue and they felt they needed to clarify and support their views.

This injection of meaning and authenticity happened best at the beginning of each unit when, as an anticipatory set, the book invited the students to brainstorm ideas, communicate thoughts, and converse about different themes. Here I will focus on one particular example to demonstrate the improvement of the quality of the students' interaction with the English language.

In one of our classes, when we finished Unit 6 of the book, I had enough time (about 20 minutes) to start a conversation as an introduction to the next unit. The main theme of Unit 7 (which will remain the main focus of the rest of this paper) was the role of women in society. This theme, I hoped, would appeal to the students, all educated female professionals. The Unit opened with (1) pictures of professional women, (2) sentences describing people, and (3) a list of adjectives for personality description. This combination of materials encouraged students to talk about what personalities matched what professions, whether women could follow those careers, and what kind of women might be willing to pursue those careers?

In contrast with the skills-based textbooks we had stopped using, the inclusion of such an anticipatory set in the lessons helped the class set a communicative tone and engage with the language more authentically. As illustrated in Table 1, for almost 10 minutes the students talked about the social and professional role of women. They also did some reading and reviewed some vocabulary, which could be employed in the exercises following this introduction. Although a positive change was visible in the process of teaching, I did not feel that we had reached the maximum level of engagement possible. Because of the reasons I will explain in the following section, I felt we could still take another step to involve the students further in a genuine exchange of information. We were going to continue with Unit 7 in the following session, so I still had the chance to reintroduce Unit 7. Cycle 2 below is an account of this second measure.

**Table 1:** Literacy Engagement in Cycle 1.

Order of Events	Literacy Engagement in Cycle 1
1	Conversation
2	Basic reading
3	Vocabulary review

## Cycle 2

This section of the article describes the impact of reading a Shakespearian sonnet as the anticipatory set of Unit 7 of the FCE preparation textbook *New First Certificate Masterclass: Student's Book* (Haines & Stewart, 1996). Cycle 2 details the lesson plan according to which the sonnet was taught and reports the significant increase in the students' literacy and linguistic engagement triggered by reading the Shakespearian sonnet.

## Problem

Although the textbook, thanks to its communicative design, helped us create an authentic linguistic context to approach FCE test preparation in a more meaningful and interactive manner, there were two reasons why I decided to reintroduce Unit 7. First, although the main theme of Unit 7 was women's rights and freedoms and thus very relevant to the population I was working with, its scope was limited to a single simple argument that could be restated as, "women should have professional lives." Although an extremely important message, this argument failed to generate as much discussion in the classroom as I had expected. While teaching this lesson, I realized the writers of the book had assumed that their book was likely to be taught in places in the world where students needed to be educated about women's rights. However, in our class, where all the students were successful female cardiologists, the idea was not deemed as particularly novel and hence did not create much discussion. Everybody immediately agreed that women were capable of conducting any profession, and this reaction from the students made me think of problematizing the feminist edge of the textbook in new ways.

Second, I did not feel we had managed to maximize the literacy engagement of the students. The communicative textbook introduction was a short (almost 10 minutes) linguistic event that helped the students (1) to speak in English and (2) to review some vocabulary. We, I thought, could do more. It is almost impossible to define CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), and there are different interpretations of what CLT in practice would look like (Harmer, 1982). I, accordingly, believed that an alternative communicative approach to this lesson would breed much more, particularly since I was aware of the knowledge, backgrounds, and experiences of my students, which, in my opinion, would allow interaction with more challenging materials.

As a result, I decided to reintroduce the book by teaching Shakespeare's Sonnet 130. Unlike the ethereal women generally portrayed in Elizabethan sonnets, Shakespeare's beloved in this sonnet is an ordinary woman. Feminist readings of the sonnet have underlined how Shakespeare breaks patriarchal moulds and challenges female stereotypes in this poem. Given the special place of poetry in Persian culture, I thought reading a poem about women might create much more conversation in my class than the introduction offered by the textbook.

## Action

Poetry has traditionally been the most dominant form of artistic expression in Persian culture. Poetry is present everywhere in Iranian culture from the most mundane everyday interactions to sophisticated cultural encounters. In the same manner, in Iranian educational systems, poetry is always employed as the main vehicle of literacy learning and teaching; students memorize poetry, interpret poetry, write poetry, and perform poetry. Every literate Iranian has at least once attempted to write poetry. Even the Iranians unable to read and write efficiently can recite lines of classical Persian poetry from memory. On the other hand, poetry, with its linguistic complexity and hermeneutic possibilities, can comfortably lend itself to natural, genuine, and communicative linguistic situations for exchanging opinions. The familiarity of the students of my class with approaching literacy through poetic language as a result of their cultural heritage convinced me that teaching the Shakespearean sonnet instead of the introduction suggested by the textbook was likely to breed successful literacy engagement.

Next to the feminist theme in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, there were two other reasons why I decided to teach a Shakespearean sonnet to this group of female cardiologists. First, the most popular form of Persian poetry is the *Ghazal*. The structure of the *Ghazal* is very similar to the

structure of the Elizabethan sonnet, a short lyrical poetry between 10 to 14 lines. The students, thus, already felt at home with the sonnet as a poetic form. Second, although teaching Shakespeare, particularly from a North American perspective, may not be currently a very popular idea, reading Shakespeare for an English learner in an EFL context is an extraordinary experience. Thanks to the gravity surrounding the name of Shakespeare, the ability to read anything by Shakespeare will be interpreted as a peak in the course of students' language learning trajectories, and thus a great morale booster for the students.

The following steps illustrate how I invited the students to read Sonnet 130 as the anticipatory set of Unit 7 of *New First Certificate Masterclass*.

1. The students read Sonnet 130 at home. Reading the poem at home saved us a considerable amount of time in the class and provided us with the opportunity of focusing on the students' thoughts on the sonnet rather than the actual process of reading. The students, in this manner, engaged with a challenging reading material (with advanced vocabulary and grammar); however, they did not need to spend a lot of time in the classroom to decode the sonnet together.
2. The students practiced reading the sonnet with correct pronunciation. Teaching poetry, particularly rhymed verse, can make focused practice of pronunciation a meaningful endeavour. Correct pronunciation can enhance the beauty of a poem and improve the reader's comprehension of it. Employing the phonetic musicality of Sonnet 130, the students were encouraged to practice reciting the poem with correct pronunciation of words and also with acceptable intonation. To help the students with the process of the phonological exploration of the poem, the students were provided with an audio file containing the reading of the poem by a native speaker of English. It is important to emphasise that requiring students to recite poetry (and even prose) in language and literacies education has been common practice in Iran for centuries. The cardiologists in my class, accordingly, welcomed the idea of practicing performing the sonnet at home willingly.
3. The students wrote a one-paragraph essay about the sonnet before coming to the classroom. The students and I agreed that this activity would be useful in two regards. First, they could organize their thoughts and become ready for the conversation about the sonnet that was to be made in the class. Second, we would take advantage of this activity as preparation for the writing module of the FCE exam, particularly essay writing.
4. When we were back in the classroom in the following session, two of the students read out the sonnet. My general strategy of how to choose students for reading publicly was mainly making room for volunteers first. Occasionally, however, I seriously encouraged the students who deemed their phonological grasp of English inadequate to perform poetry publicly as a confidence building measure.
5. Informed by the paragraphs the students had written, they discussed about the sonnet in two groups. Next, they shared their ideas with the whole class. This step of the lesson plan was meant to constitute the main conversation about the portrayal of women in the Shakespearean sonnet and to replace the more narrowed introduction offered by the FCE textbook. The class had a lively conversation about the manner Shakespeare described his beloved. The most frequent themes emerging from the students' comments included (1) typical patriarchal female stereotypes, (2) the ethereal woman as a patriarchal construct, (3) the objectification of the female body in Western methods of advertising, and (4) the portrayal of women as divine but untouchable beings in Persian culture.

I had hoped that this conversation would end our introduction to Unit 7 and that we would move on to talk about the rest of the unit. Nevertheless, students felt so invested in the conversation that they led the lesson to a new direction.

6. Dr. Mitra (pseudonym) read a *Ghazal* by Hafez to prove classical Persian poetry more patriarchal than Shakespearean sonnets. Despite my intention to guide the class back to the textbook to cover the rest of the book, the students passionately commenced a new conversation about the poem. The students' enthusiasm and the way the topic of conversation connected with their identities as female Iranians hardly let me interfere with this organic development of the lesson plan.

Impressed by Shakespeare's portrayal of women as humans of flesh and blood, Dr. Mitra recited a *Ghazal* by Hafez, a fourteenth century poet, in Persian in order to criticize the treatment of women in Persian poetry as ethereal but untouchable beings. Dr. Mitra's choice of *Ghazal* and Hafez was by no means accidental. The *Ghazal*, which is the most popular form of poetry in Persian literature, bears close similarities to the Petrarchan and, in the same virtue, the Elizabethan sonnet, and thus a convenient example for comparison. Also, Hafez is the most frequently published classical poet in the Iranian Plateau, a name as grave in the East as Shakespeare in the West. Almost every Iranian family keeps a collection of his sonnets at home and he is quoted by the educated and the illiterate, the young and the old, and in educational circles and streets.

Therefore, Hafez's poems mirror many dominant discourses in Iranian society, and particularly in this case discourses about women. Our feminist reading of the sonnet in 2005 coincided with the rapid growth of the Iranian feminist movement, which had also attracted my students as educated and professional females. Thus, Dr. Mitra's critique of the patriarchal discourses in Hafez's *Ghazal* in comparison with Shakespeare's sonnet was profoundly connected to the social and political being of my students.

Dr. Mitra, in particular, emphasized the following lines from the *Ghazal*, in order to discuss the dangers of painting women as idols and decorated beauties, who are not supposed to have much mobility and be active in society.

I worship an idol, a red rose resting under the shade of hyacinths.  
Like spring, her visage is stained by violet and crimson flowers.

The majority of the students agreed with Dr. Mitra. However, employing a popular interpretation of Hafez's poetry, a few believed it was a mistake to see Hafez's beloved in this *Ghazal* as a woman. They emphasized that the poem was mystical and Hafez's beloved in this *Ghazal* was symbolic of God. Despite this interpretation, these students did not fall short of criticizing portraying women as ethereal beings.

7. A poet myself, I had studied this *Ghazal* closely before. Despite my desire to continue with the rest of the unit, I could not help but remind my students that the poem was in fact addressed to a man not a woman. The homeotic aspects of Persian Poetry have been regularly kept silent about in Iranian society especially as the result of importing homophobic Victorian morality through modernity since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the dominance of Islamic values in different periods of Iranian history including the current period. My students, accordingly, were not aware that Hafez was not addressing a woman in this *Ghazal* but a

prince. “Stained by violet and crimson flowers,” I reminded the class, was a description of the beard of the prince Hafez was writing for.

A heated conversation followed. Some students said that they had read about the queer nature of Hafez’s poetry. One student even provided another example. Some students denied this interpretation of the poem and emphasised the mystical nature of the Hafez’s poetry. Although this lively conversation could have continued with the same amount of energy, at this point I had to stop the conversation and invite the class to return to the textbook to cover the rest of the unit.

### Outcome

Replacing the introduction of Unit 7 offered by the textbook with Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 — the measure taken in the second cycle of action—significantly increased the literacy engagement of the students. Also, it helped the students make connections between the lesson and their identities as female Iranians. In the same manner, it created possibilities in the classroom for the students to critique the discourses in the culture they were living in, namely the manifestation of patriarchal ideologies in Persian written culture.

Whereas in Cycle 1 the students had some meaningful literacy engagement by following the instructions of the textbook (see Table 1), with the action taken in the second cycle, they heavily invested in the lesson and more passionately led the class fuelled by their opinions, interests, and their experiences as educated plurilingual women. As illustrated in Table 2, the students’ interactions with the lesson can be listed, in order of occurrence, as follows:

1. The students read and tried to decode and comprehend a complex text, Sonnet 130.
2. In the course of reading the sonnet, the students wrestled with advanced grammatical structures.
3. In the same manner, they became familiar with some new advanced vocabulary.
4. Thanks to musical intensity of poetry, the students focused on pronunciation in a meaningful way and polished their phonological abilities.
5. Students read the poem from a feminist perspective.
6. The students read and recited complex written texts in their first language. They negotiated their mother tongue with English and examined the social and cultural discourses reflected in the “high” literatures of these languages.
7. The students adopted queer theory to reread the *Ghazal* and discussed homoerotic elements in Hafiz’s poetry.

**Table 2:** Literacy Engagement in Cycle 2.

Order of Events	Literacy Engagement in Cycle 2
1	Reading complex texts
2	Dealing with advanced grammar
3	Vocabulary practice
4	Focus on pronunciation
5	Feminist reading of the sonnet
6	Reading complex text in L1 for comparison
7	Queer reading of the <i>Ghazal</i>



## Summery, Implications, and Further Questions

This article reports the process of an action research project on the impact of reading poetry on student literacy engagement in an EFL standardized test preparation course. This research project was conducted in a class of eight female Iranian adult professionals preparing for the First Certificate of English (FCE) examination, provided by Cambridge English Language Assessment. Standardized tests are believed to narrow the curriculum, to reduce emphasis on complex thinking, and to have “washback” effect on the quality of teaching. In this project, in order to improve the quality of the students’ literacy engagement two particular measures were taken. In the first cycle of action, the class chose to switch from skills-based preparation textbooks to a textbook written with a communicative view of language learning. Each unit in this textbook was organized based on a socially sensitive issue to encourage the students to practice the linguistic skills required for the test in a meaningful context. In the second cycle, as an introduction to the lesson, the students read a Shakespearian sonnet which echoed the main theme of the unit. As a result of these measures, two significant changes occurred. First, there was a noticeable increase in the students’ authentic linguistic engagement. Second, the students took control of the content discussed in class and connected their conversations to their own beliefs identities, and backgrounds.

Students usually participate in standardized test preparation classes for very practical purposes. Nevertheless, as illustrated in this paper, reading poetry even in this kind of setting can result in more meaningful interactions with literacy. Poetry can enrich literacy events in two respects. First, the intensity of poetic language can challenge students’ linguistic skills. Second, poetic ambiguity can provide students with different hermeneutic possibilities; and since poetic language is open to interpretation, students’ readings of poetic texts will reflect their prior knowledge, backgrounds, and identities.

However, two unique characteristics of the above experiment make it difficult to generalize the findings of this project and at the same time create questions for further inquiries. First, since this particular class was held in a rather informal educational setting, my students and I had enough control over the curriculum for experimenting with the content of learning and teaching methods. Further inquiries on the impact of reading poetry in more formal educational settings, where teachers and students should follow centralized curricula, would shed more light on this issue.

Second, the decision to read poetry in our test preparation class was not merely made as an instrumental measure to increase the linguistic performance of the students. It was, instead, a conscious attempt to challenge the structures that, because of the instrumental value of standardized tests, can impose learning and teaching strategies that disregard students’ prior knowledge, backgrounds, and identities. As a result, it would be interesting to conduct projects that map out the structures and power relations that have created literacy events such as standardized tests and literacy situations such as test preparation classes. It is also helpful to conduct phenomenological inquiries into teachers and students’ experiences of such examinations and classes.

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