



## Mother Nature's Tongue Language Education for Promoting Environmental Sensitivity

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### Abstract

*Positivist and reductionist worldviews are dominating most areas of human's life. Disconnected from others, nature, and our Self, we grow up to become ego-centered consumers who suck the life out of the Earth. Our test-driven education can be regarded as one of the major culprits and at the same time victims of this compartmentalization. It force-feeds us with isolated packs of knowledge, having little to do with our intuition, feeling, interest, creativity, imagination, wisdom, and our real need for a natural environment. Educators of any subject matter are responsible for educating a generation that cares about our bleeding Mother Nature. As the first step, they should sensitize future businessmen, politicians, managers etc. to environmental issues and interconnection among all things. This qualitative case study is going to reflect on an already practiced holistic arts-based approach to education of ninety 11-12 year old EFL beginners in one of the junior high schools of Iran. It aims to show how it is possible for a language teacher to promote teenagers' sense of interconnection with Nature and consequently their ecological sensitivity, through art and reflection.*

### 1. Introduction

The more I explored the injured nature of Northern parts of Iran, the heavier my heart became; as if all those pollutions suffocated my heart. For a few minutes, my life and job seemed absurd: "What is the point of teaching English or other subject matters when we are ignorant about safekeeping the beautiful Nature that God has entrusted us? What is the point of teaching foreign languages when we're still foreigner to the language of our hearts, and language of our Mother Nature?" I decided to find the meaning of my career, as an educator, in relationship with more important issues: My Creator, myself, people, and Nature. What follows describes my first experience with environmental language education through a holistic approach:

#### 1.1 Context

I was going to teach in a new school in Tehran province. Flowers and natural scenes were painted on its walls. As I entered the school building, the sight of three stuffed animals, a seagull, a weasel, and a woodpecker on three shelves in the corridor caught my eyes. In those shelves there were many alcohol jars containing small animals and embryos. It was a government run school for talented students and to enter it, hundreds of students compete. It was a highly disciplined test-driven school in which students were terribly pushed into a rat race to get higher scores in numerous tests. There were so many stressful factors that students could hardly think of more important issues around them. The atmosphere seemed limiting, but I had a newborn dream ...



## 2. Primary steps

The first step for educating a child to befriend Nature, is befriending child's nature. Traditional education attacks the heart of child's nature and soul, "feelings" [3], by limiting his playtime, overloading him with stressful tests and homework, suppressing his creativity and imagination, and ignoring his unique voice. On the other hand, **pedagogy of being** and **holistic education** value child's nature, because in them child's uniqueness and polarities are acknowledged; child is the subject of his own learning; imagination and creativity are seen as means of contributing to his personal development [6]; and the relationship between self and Self, linear thinking and intuition, mind and body, and relationship to Nature [2] is strengthened.

Instead of tests and textbooks, we focused on unique portfolios. We could communicate our feelings through reflective essays and journals. Art was encouraged because, as a "part of us" [5], it develops feeling [1], creativity and connection to the creation and Creator, and "enable[s] us to see beyond the 'purposive consciousness' which has led us into ecological peril"[9]. They were so happy for this primary change, especially for gaining respect and trust: One of them expressed his gratitude for reading their reflective essays carefully. Another student writes: "... [Teacher] respects students, even naughty ones".

## 2. Main steps

To raise students' ecological sensitivity I tried to promote their 1.sense of wonder, 2.appreciation of interconnection among all parts and events of universe, 3. Global responsibility, and 4.vision of hope :

### 2.1 Sense of wonder

Wonder appeals to our nature because it's a "part of our response to the real and is present from birth"[3]. Education should promote wonder to connect the child to the whole Nature. Unfortunately, "in traditional, government-mandated, test-driven education we insist so much on performing up to someone else's expectations that children soon lose their sense of wonder [8].

One session, I presented them a PowerPoint Show about the vastness of universe. As the camera zoomed out from a leaf to Earth, Solar System, and oceans of galaxies they chorused WOW and sometimes hit their palms on their foreheads. The beauty of wonder in their faces was so wonderful. They wrote:

*"We have an endless life"*

*"God has created the world beautiful and harmonic";*

*"In comparison to the world we're both too small and too big"*

*"Creation is so great and we are so tiny... Thank God because I'm not too big to become supercilious, and not too little to not exist..."*

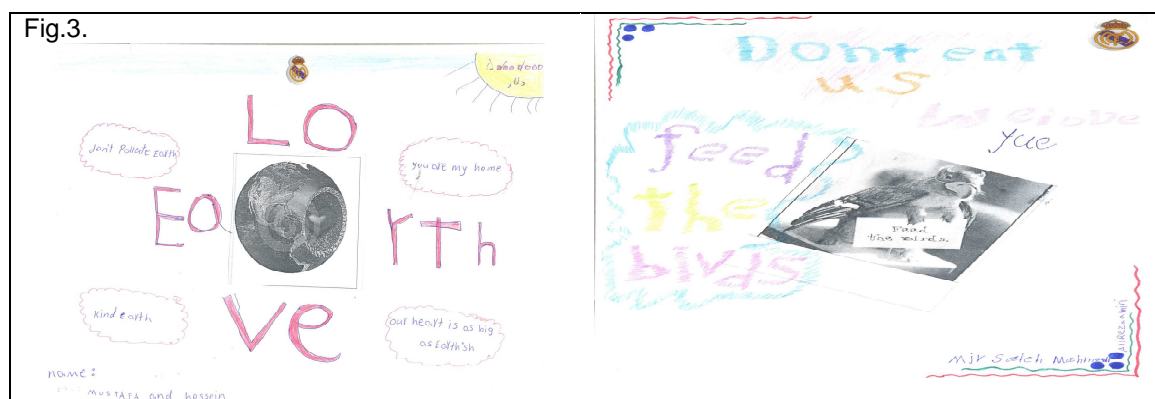
### 2.2 Interconnections

Causality "has been observed in infants as young as 4 months"[7]. It becomes more sophisticated with their growth, but under the effect of dominant compartmentalized mentalities most of them stick to daily life and stop exploring the causes and effects of many important issues of their world. Education should promote higher levels of causality in students.

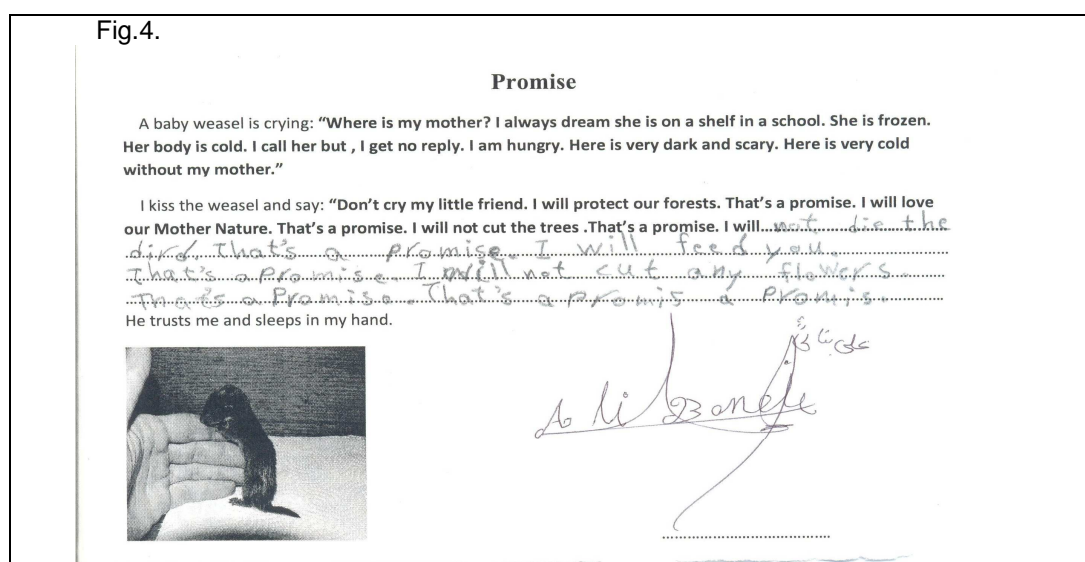
One session we discussed about "Butterfly effect". Then collaboratively we wrote effects of an act of kindness: *"I help a poor man...He becomes happy... He buys food for his family... They become happy..."*

We discussed and draw similar interconnections among natural forces and elements. We wrote dialogues for them. I called it "divine discourse" because students chose a discourse of love among mountains, plants, animals...(Fig.1) Unfortunately we didn't have the chance to play it. Such practices help them feel and appreciate the right for living for every part of nature





One session I distributed among them two uncompleted reading texts in which a baby weasel and a baby seagull were crying for their missing mothers (Fig.4):



It took a while for first students to discover that babies in their texts cried for the stuffed weasel and seagull in our own school. They were shocked and I was shocked more, because most students, and even teachers who were teaching there for years, hadn't noticed those animals in their school. Those poor animals had been degraded to lifeless adornments, and, lost among those colorful walls, they had failed to catch people's attention. In my last interview, one student said: "I had the happiest moments in your class but the session on weasel and seagull made a very sad day to me." He was right; the story was too painful, but more painful than that is the "pain of painlessness". A dominant mechanistic, ego-centered, consumerist and compartmentalized mentality has numbed the modern man. Under the colorful disguises of this mentality, lies the promise of stagnation and death for humanity and Nature. It pulls the wool before human's aesthetic eyes that an animal or any other being is beautiful when it is tamed, imprisoned, frozen, or stuffed. This is the same mentality that conceives of an ideal student as obeying and passive to be stuffed with force-fed information that has little to do with his nature. It's the mentality that destroys forests of very diverse plants, and at the best state beguiles people with green parks and streets of homogenized trees. It can't even tolerate the uniqueness of those homogenized ones and molds them further. It's the





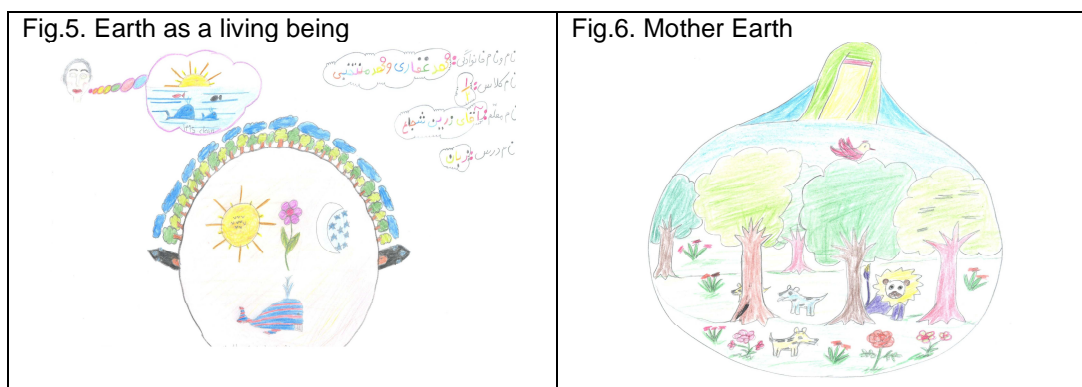
same mentality that tends to homogenize people in/by politics, education, research.... It's even eradicating the homogenized trees and quenching our thirst for nature with mirages of wall paintings. Like the devil queen of Narnia, it's freezing the grandeur of wild nature.

## 2.4 Envisioning hope

Despite the dominance of this mentality in human affairs, we should never let ourselves and others fall in the devil trap of disappointment. Paulo Ferrier says:

*I do not understand human existence and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream. Hope is an ontological need. Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearing, and become a distortion of the ontological need. . . . When it becomes a program, hopelessness paralyzes us, immobilizes us. We succumb to fatalism, and then it becomes impossible to muster the strength we absolutely need for the fierce struggle that will re-create the world. . . . [3]*

We experienced visualization practices for dreaming a hopeful future for the Earth and humanity. It started like this: I close my eyes... and each student went on to visualize a bright future for humanity and Nature. The results of their reflections were often surprisingly beyond my expectations. One group conceived of the Earth as a living being with a face (Fig.5). Each element of nature comprises a part of this face, even human being. All those limbs are interconnected. Ailment in one limb can affect the whole body.



Another student drew Earth as a sacred mother who holds in her arms all her children (Fig.6). He visualized :

*I close my eyes: I see the forest. There are animals in it' Lions play with each other. Animals are happy. I see a beautiful dog. It has a baby. Mother Earth is clean and happy. I see tall trees. The birds sing. I am happy for Earth. It isn't dirty. It isn't polluted. It is green and beautiful. I love earth.*

## 3. Reflections

This approach provided the chance for students to review, re-excavate, and nurture in themselves a sense of oneness with nature, understanding the interconnection among different parts of nature as a conscious body, a sense of wonder, reverence for nature as a sacred mother, and responsibility for protection of nature. These results emerged organically in their artworks and writings every now and then:

Those changes in attitudes had some realizations in their behavior towards nature, too; for example a mother wrote to me: *"my son doesn't leave rubbish in nature anymore..."*. Another student told me: *"... animals have feelings, too. They have their own sweet life... I wonder how we can kill them... I decided not to eat meat anymore, but my dad doesn't allow me ..."*

One night I dreamt of a crying tree on fire. I thought it was a rare case and I should record that moment for research. As I was taking pictures I asked myself "why don't you extinguish the fire?" I dropped the



camera and fetched a bucket of water, but it was too late. Tree was already lying in his ashes, breathing his last breath. I woke up with sadness. Nature warned me about the main drawback of my work, sticking too much to theory. I learned that environmental education should be for nature not merely about nature. Objectives of a Nature-friendly curriculum should focus on environmental crisis of an area and solve them with the help of children who are encouraged to hope, dream, and act for a better world.

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