Peace Education through Literary Works in English Language Classes

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Abstract

This paper reports a longitudinal case study of peace education in two English language courses namely Topical Conversation and Reading Comprehension. The participants, chosen through convenience sampling, were 15 (7 males and 8 females) Iranian English language learners with the age range of 18 to 24. Eight literary works imbued with peace, non-violence, and diversity values were used for the purpose of peace education in the two courses. Various qualitative tools of data collection, such as interviews, journals, classroom presentations, ethnographic field notes, and memos were used. These data sources were gathered from the two courses in two consecutive semesters at Sharif University of Technology in the city of Tehran, as part of a minor program in English language and literature. Then, the students' progress was traced through their journal entries, classroom presentations, and the researchers' own participatory observation and field notes. Hybrid thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings showed that the two courses had a positive impact on the students' overall awareness of peace values. Besides, the noteworthy themes extracted from the qualitative data included self-knowledge, knowledge of the local world, knowledge of others, peace with nature, and acknowledgment of and respect for diversities and unheard voices. Generally, the proposed literary works helped the participants reevaluate their stereotypical opinions about marginalized groups.

Key words: English language learners, literature, peace education, qualitative research

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Introduction

Peace education and studies have become more recently rife in academic publications (Salomon & Cairns, 2011). These developments further stress the need to pay more attention to peace tenets and values in educational settings. Previous studies show that different aspects of peace education have been investigated. Example of these studies include teaching peace in school classes (e.g., Clarke-Habibi, 2005), art and literary works in peace education (e.g., Morris et al., 2000), teacher training courses (e.g., Cook, 2014), and critical peace education (e.g., Ramezanzadeh & Rezaei, 2023).

Despite the diversity of issues in peace studies, very few scholars (Eslami-Somea & Movassagh, 2014) have explored peace education in the Iranian context. Explicating the challenges and potential possibilities of peace education in Iran, Eslami-Somea and Movassagh make mention of religious or linguistic minorities in this country that are defined as *other* just because of their diverse identity features. They believe that social and political challenges in Iran, such as the eight years of war with Iraq, have led to the dichotomous thinking among Iranian people "in which the compassion and hospitality that are common traits among Iranians coexist with a distrust of the 'other', where the 'other' in this context may refer to foreigners as well as Iranians" (p. 33). In fact, they assert that dichotomous thinking resulted from the coexistence of emotions of hospitality and distrust as well as the existing boundary between self and other because diverse identity features cause tensions and conflicts in Iran and make this country a highly critical context for peace education.

Furthermore, as explained above, Iran has been afflicted with an eight-year-long war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988, the horrifying consequences of which are still haunting many families in Iran. Dealing with post-war conditions or managing the complexity of post-disaster conditions in Iran demands the development of resilience, recovery, and reconciliation programs. As Zembylas (2007) indicates, peace education pedagogies and programs "can actively facilitate the efforts for peace coexistence and reconciliation by helping to dismantle the system of entrenched myths and antagonistic trauma narratives that perpetuate divisions between communal groups" (p. 220). Nevertheless, school and university curricula in Iran do not give sufficient space to peace issues (Rezaei, Abe & Farhang, 2022).

Additionally, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, scanty attention is paid to the explicit instruction of peace values in language classes in Iran although raising intercultural awareness and understanding has been the focus of previous research (Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018).

Accordingly, to fill the above-mentioned gap in language classes in Iran, the present study reports the findings from two courses held in two consecutive semesters in a university in the city of Tehran. The researchers planned to explore the role of peace education in affecting language learners' attitudes towards peace. Indeed, the present study sought to examine the higher education students' attitudes towards the effect of peace education through literary texts on their attitudes and/or development of peace values. Moreover, the study probed deep into the way the proposed courses could raise students' knowledge of the world and its conflicts and could help them start taking actions for resolving problems and ensuring social justice. In brief, the present research was after finding answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the attitude of English language learners towards the incorporation of literary works in their English language courses?
2. What values emerge out of peace education courses premised on literary works?

Theoretical Framework and Purpose of the Study

This research is theoretically situated within the peace education theories proposed in the literature, including the works of Harris and Morrison (2003). Harris and Morrison maintain that peace education revolves around the processes of reflection, cooperation among people, and conflict resolution. They explain that people around the world can be empowered to act against violence and choose peace under conflicting situations, when they gain knowledge about the elements of violence and peace-making skills. Also, Mishra (2021) asserts that peace education should offer individuals the necessary knowledge to understand and respect diverse groups of people. For the teaching purpose in this research, we have specifically drawn on the framework developed by McInnis and Wells (1994) used in Kruger (2012). McInnis and Wells' framework is made up of three stages, namely 1) developing the knowledge of self, others, and the world; 2) forming a critical

understanding of the knowledge gained in the first step; and 3) taking actions based on what the learners have acquired from the first two steps.

As also explained by Kruger (2012), these three steps are interrelated. Outlining their framework, McInnis and Wells (1994) state that the first step helps learners to develop a self-understanding which is conducive for empathizing with others and tolerating differences, which in turn can give learners an understanding of the world and the way they should respect and protect it. While knowledge of others involves cross-cultural understanding and effective communications among various people, knowledge of the world concerns global accountability and acknowledgment of human rights. Knowledge of self, others, and the world addresses peace education in the three domains of each individual's life, that is, the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup domains. As Nelson (2021) points out, all peace education programs should consider the three above-mentioned domains if they aim at the development of personal factors that positively influence peacefulness. In the second step, which is defined by McInnis and Wells as the process of assessment for evaluating and critiquing information, learners are invited to critically organise and assess the complex issues. Indeed, learners are asked to critically challenge and question the dominant narratives and interpretations of various social issues that lead to the marginalization of particular groups of people who do not conform to the existing standards and norms. Thus, learners are taught this point that there is no essential feature for assessing and evaluating the way people live. According to Schulz and Sentama (2020), questioning essentialist attitudes towards people across the world, we find the possibility to identify and stand against all colonial projects, which are constantly reproduced through their mechanism of inclusion/exclusion of groups of people that are diverse rather than different. And finally, in the last step, learners learn to act and find solutions to the conflict and violence around them. Following this general theoretical and practical framework, we included several themes pertinent to the concept of peace (Kruger, 2012) in our classes to raise learners' awareness and knowledge of self, others, and the world. These themes included 1) empathy, sympathy, mutual understanding, and others' emotions; 2) topics, including multiculturalism, multilingualism, multiethnicity, diversity, and social inclusion/exclusion; 3) human rights; 4) intrapersonal, interpersonal, and global peace/nonviolence; 5) resolving global conflicts and ecological sustainability; and 6)

envisioning a positive future based on creative imagery (McInnis & Wells, 1994).

To teach these peace values in classes, we used literary works with peace as their dominant themes. We tried to have a democratic teaching approach in which diversity and multivocality were welcomed and appreciated. Following this theoretical framework, the role of literary texts has also been corroborated to be essential and useful for constructing knowledge in peace education (e.g., Powers, 2007). In other words, for Powers, reading war literature can familiarise learners with the world and use their experiences for their own contexts. To accomplish this overall objective in the present research, we employed world literature on peace to promote peace values in students. Then, through various activities, students were given the opportunity to critically evaluate the proposed issues in their classes and share the actions they would take to solve the problems.

Literature Review

Peace education is the part and parcel of transformative pedagogy through which educators strive to build up the culture of peace and lessen or uproot sources of conflict, inequity, hostility, and violence (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007). Freire (1973) argues that teachers and their profession should bring critical consciousness as they are critical agents of the society whose tautology can impact students. It is, therefore, incumbent upon teachers to act more critically and have more agency in their practice.

The literature on peace education (Harris, 2010) shows that the mechanisms to promote peace in schools and colleges have been widespread especially in conflict regions and countries, such as Palestine and North Ireland. Several peace education programs have been implemented to reduce hostility, racism, stereotyping and hatred and instead foster the values of democracy and peace among people in the conflict zones in the Middle East (Hirsch, 2006). The Japanese (e.g., Tanigawa, 2015) have also incorporated peace values—through A-Bomb Education—in their school curriculum to remind their people of the horrific bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and to deter them from re-experiencing such a catastrophe. In India, peace education by far relies on the teachings of Gandhi and his non-violence doctrine (e.g., Bajaj, 2010). In Scandinavian countries, peace education attempts to raise people's awareness about the plights that people have in the global south, especially

poor countries in Africa. In South Korea, educationalists have attempted to teach peace values when in conflict with North Korea.

Pedagogically, teachers and action researchers have applied different strategies and content materials for their peace courses. Among many artefacts, as teaching materials, literature has proved to be of more salience and significance for language learning (Carter, 2007; Kruger, 2012; Paesani, 2001). Among many, Powers (2007) shows how the literature embedded in classic epics, the Vietnam War, World War II (Especially the Holocaust), the Jews and Palestinians, Partition in India, and the Native Americans can be used as valuable instances for peace curriculum. Powers (2007) concludes that by reading these literary works we can make our students more conscious about the devastating impact of war and how we can reach a deeper interpretation of war and the warmongers.

Luke and Myers (1994) have also argued for the implementation of literature for peace education in children's classes. They bring several examples of literary texts that have the potential for promoting peace values in children. Studying elementary and middle school students, Killingsworth Roberts (2005), likewise, has argued for the application of reading and writing poetry in the form of formula poems to create and boost peace in classrooms. Similarly, Seban (2011) provides some useful teaching techniques through picture books for teaching peace in a third-grade classroom. For Seban, children's literature provides a useful context and content for promoting peace values in learners. He further stresses that non-English speaking teachers can use the literature in their native tongue for teaching peace values. In the same way, Malm and Löfgren (2007) have investigated the role of educational drama on conflict resolution among school children. They collected data from questionnaires, interviews, journal entries, and observation and their results showed that drama had been very effective in empowering students to manage their conflicts. In her English classes, Gorrell (2000) also used ecphrastic poetry to promote peace values. She gave her students a poem written about a photograph showing a child during the Holocaust and asked her students to write in response to the poem. Students' ecphrastic poems were analysed and a sense of empathy promoted in them in reaction to the poem was observed.

The above-cited studies show the role of peace education and literature in (language) classes. Hirsch (2006), among others, has emphasised both the cognitive

and emotional effectiveness of stories in developing peace values. In spite of the growing literature on the role of peace education in language classes (e.g., Kruger, 2012; Vasilopoulos et al., 2018), a dearth of rigorous and longitudinal research in this area is felt, especially in the Middle East context which has witnessed wars more frequently in the present century. One major significance of this study is the inclusion of peace education in an English language course—what seems not to be fully addressed in the literature. Besides, there is less research on peace education in the Iranian educational system, especially in language courses in universities. Another distinctive feature of this research is its being conducted among adolescents. Previous research has focused more on peace education among children, but the present study reports the findings of a longitudinal research at a university in the city of Tehran. As Conley Tyler and Bretherton (2006) acknowledge, the existing literature on peace education predominantly focused on the context of schools, whereas peace education in higher education has not received enough attention. Generally, the present researchers attempted to seek the effectiveness of the two peace-based courses on the students' attitudes and/or development of peace values.

Method

Participants

The participants, selected through convenience sampling, were 15 Iranian science and engineering students (7 males and 8 females) aged 18 to 24 from two intact courses at Sharif University of Technology in the city of Tehran where students are exposed to technical, science, and engineering courses and are less exposed to alternative teaching approaches such as transformative pedagogy and peace education. They had signed up for two courses in two consecutive semesters as part of a minor program in English language and literature. Since some of the students had not taken the first or the second course—namely, Topical Conversation and Reading Comprehension courses—the data from only 15 students was included for the findings of this research. These two courses were offered from September to July and based on the results of a TOEFL mock test, the participants were at intermediate to upper-intermediate level of proficiency.

Teaching Materials

The teaching materials utilised in this research included some literary works which were imbued with peace, non-violence and diversity values. We particularly used the experiences presented by Henry and Middleton-Kaplan (2010) to select the most appropriate and applicable teaching materials, especially literary works, for teaching peace and non-violence. Table 1 shows the materials selected for the purpose of this study and their themes. Classroom topics were pursued through some post-course discussions which took place in Edmodo as an online language learning space (Rezaei & Latifi, 2020). On the other hand, the second course was a reading-based course, and literary works, as shown in Table 1, were used to trigger discussion and critical reflection on peace values.

Table 1

Teaching Materials Imbued with Peace, Non-violence, and Diversity Values

Literary Work	Dominant Theme
The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini	Minorities in Iran and the world
I am Malala by Malala Yousafzai & Christina Lamb	Gender issues
The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brian	War and peace in the world
Nelson Mandela	Noble peace prize winners and their lives
Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	Cultural diversity and linguistic pluralism
Tom Brown's Schooldays	School violence
Walden by Henry David Thoreau	The nature and wild
The Alchemist by Paolo Coelho	Intrapersonal/Interpersonal peace values

Teaching Procedure

As mentioned above, the data for the present research were taken from two courses, namely Topical Conversation (1.5 hrs per week) and Reading Comprehension (3 hrs per week) in two consecutive semesters. The instructor was one of the current researchers who gained an emic perspective via participatory observation. Topics, such as stereotyping, linguistic/cultural/ethnic diversity, peace with the nature, interpersonal/intrapersonal peace, anti-war sentiments, refugees and willingness to communicate with others, ethnocentrism, and intercultural/cross-cultural issues were highlighted in these two courses. In both courses, students were supposed to read some materials, especially in the form of literary texts cited above, and come to the class for discussion. As an example, the students had read *The Kite*

Runner which was very interesting to the students because the story happened in Afghanistan, a neighboring country with a large number of refugees in Iran. Both the setting and the events in this novel motivated the students to talk about Afghan refugees in Iran and the plights that they were having in exile. This novel provided a good setting for the students to speak more freely about their own experiences with the refugees in Iran and the ways they were treated.

Data Collection Instruments and Analysis

A TOEFL mock test was used to homogenise the participants regarding their level of language proficiency. To reach triangulated data, we collected data from different sources, including semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, memos, classroom discussions, and students' presentations. An interview protocol was developed by the researchers based on the major elements in peace education, soliciting information about students' overall attitudes towards the course and its contents, teaching methodology, activities, and take-home assignments. This semi-structured interview was held at the outset of the first semester and then repeated at the end of the second semester. Students were interviewed at the beginning of the term to explore if they had had any experiences in peace education. Furthermore, more emergent and open questions were asked at the end of the course through the second round of interviews to explore the students' evaluation of the course and their experiences in peace education. These interviews, which were held in English and Persian (code-switching), were recorded for later analysis and took around 30 minutes for each student. The data were later transcribed and thematically analysed. To establish the credibility of qualitative findings and increase the trustworthiness of the study, the findings were shown to the students for participant validation (known as member checking). This helped the researchers refine some themes and add one more. One of the researchers' fieldnotes were also used for the analysis of changes in students' attitudes. The classroom discussions were audio-recorded, with the consent of the students, so that they could be later retrieved for analysis. The findings and themes were finalized based on 80% agreement between the two researchers on the saliency of the themes, which means only the themes with congruency between the two researchers were accepted.

Students' journals also provided another source of data. The journals had some entries which prompted the students to voice their opinions regarding the topics in

class, the novels and stories they read, and the ensuing discussions that transpired in class. Students in each course were also encouraged to present a short lecture on a topic pertinent to the class discussion theme. An example was a lecture by one of the students about the Iran-Iraq war and its horrifying consequences in children's lives especially the ones born during the 1980s.

Results and Discussion

The main question in this research was the impact of peace education through literary texts on the students' attitudes towards and/or development of peace values. To find answer to this research question, triangulated data from interviews, observation, students' journals, and their lectures were checked. Hybrid thematic analysis was utilised by the researchers to analyse the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In this approach the researchers relied on the data to extract *new* themes inductively and simultaneously took a deductive approach where some *pre-existing* themes in the literature were capitalised on for thematic analysis. Below the findings are presented.

Attitudes Towards the Courses

One of the purposes of this study was to explore the attitudes of students towards the peace-based courses of Conversation and Reading Comprehension. The findings from interviews with the students at the end of the second course showed that the two courses had had an effective positive impact on their attitudes. They believed that the two courses had been very interesting in familiarizing them with some nuances of life which have been neglected in other courses at the university. They also believed that the content of the two courses had been useful in making them more conscious about peace values in their lives. Two of the students, in particular, said that:

Interview Extract 1: Saman

I have never had such a course before. I think the novels and stories we read were very helpful in motivating us….I would take a similar course if it was offered.

Interview Extract 2: Reza

After this course, I have become more alert about the diversity in the world.

I have learnt to respect this diversity more and become less judgmental about people and their behavior.

Since asking the students about their attitudes towards the courses would be critical in the presence of the course instructor, these questions were given in the form of prompts, and students responded to them in written format in their journal entries. These entries were anonymized and collected by one of the students and delivered to the course instructor at the end of the second semester. These anonymized written responses were very illuminating since students could freely express their attitudes towards the course. The findings of checking these journal entries showed that the majority of the students had positive ideas about the two courses and were very enthusiastic towards their contents. Some of the students also provided some comments on the materials and the teaching methodologies of the courses. Ahmad, as one of the students had written that:

> *I think one major strength of this course was its contents....I also liked the bond and empathy that developed during the course. I think the novels we read brought hope to us. I can remember that the discussions over war and peace in the world was very interesting to us. It made us think more about the consequences of such devastating wars on humanity.*

On the other hand, some students believed that some of these novels were long and required lots of preparation before the class. They believed that shorter novels or stories would be better substitutes. In this regard, Sara said in her journal that:

> **Journal Entry 2**
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> *I am generally in favour of literature and I liked the course and its contents but I think some of these novels and books were very long and I could not prepare well for them....Besides, some had a difficult language....I think some of my friends had this problem too.*

Student' Knowledge of Self, Others, and the World

The second research question probed the role of peace education—premised on literary works—on the development of certain values in students. In order to find the answer to this question, the dominant themes extracted from different methods of qualitative data collection used in the present study with respect to the way the proposed literary courses could shape or reshape students' knowledge of self, others, and the world are introduced and discussed as follows.

Deeper Knowledge of One's Own Self and Local World

Journal entries, initial interviews and students' comments during the first course showed that the learners knew little, if any, about peace education. Some were very excited but at the same time were not sure about the procedure and the importance of these topics. For instance, Shima a 20-year-old girl in the first course, said that:

Interview Extract 3: Shima

The topics that you are introducing here are not something that I can understand. What is the role of these topics in my life?....I don't know why we should discuss these topics and how the professor is planning to evaluate us at the end of the course.

The analysis of the qualitative data led to the identification of the noteworthy theme of deeper knowledge of one's own self and local world. The majority of the participants believed that the two courses proposed in the current study could offer a possibility for enhancing their knowledge of themselves and the world in which they live. In the interview extract 4, Ali asserts that the contents of the two courses made him more aware of himself and the world around him:

Interview Extract 4: Ali

As the course continued, I became more aware that I lack the necessary knowledge of myself, my classmates and the world around me.

In his journal entry, Ali spoke of his country and expounded his views on the way the literary courses could enrich his knowledge of Iran, where he lives:

Journal Entry 3

I remember we had some friends from other parts of Iran who looked different for us. We did not try to befriend them but now and in this class I have some friends from other cultural backgrounds that I think can enrich my understanding of Iran and this will hopefully make me know more about the world.

Peace with Nature

Another dominant and recurring theme in the students' presentation and journal entries was the salient role and importance of the nature in the Iranian present life. With the recent rise of environmentalism discourse in social media, people have become more mindful of the importance of nature and how people

should deal with it. In particular, one of the students in his reflective journal had said that he had been impressed by the topics introduced in the course. Following the session on 'Respecting the Nature and Wild' he felt very impressed by the way Henry David Thoreau had lived near Walden pond. He said in his journal that:

Journal Entry 4

I could never imagine how people's greed has devastated the world. People are very greedy these days and are not satisfied with what they get from the nature. I think life in the nature should be accompanied by respecting the nature. Henry David Thoreau's solitary life in the cabin was very interesting for me. I think he had a very peaceful life and that can be a role model for us.

Also, Shiva said in her interview that:

Interview Extract 5: Shiva

We keep a kitten at home and my sister and I are responsible for feeding her and taking
care of her. Our parents bought her last year and now that we have this topic in our
class I can realise how mom and dad wanted us to be kind to animals.

However, in the interview held prior to the beginning of the first course, most students declared that they did not have such a topic in other courses and they did not pay much attention to peace with the nature. Despite this general tendency, one of the students was a member of the university mountain climbing community and motivated others to join him in their environmental adventures. He was a source of inspiration for other students and gave a lecture in class about the role of nature in today's human life. In brief, while the majority were not sensitive in the first course, the topics in the second course began to sensitise them about peace with the nature.

Respect for Diversities

Interview data at the outset of the first course revealed that students had not been exposed to such a course before, most probably because they were studying science and engineering and topics in social sciences and humanities are usually neglected in such fields. As shown in the interview extract 6, Sina, as one of the students, clearly says that not only was he incognizant of these topics, but also about

the ways these topics, including diversity, could be applicable in his own life.

Interview Extract 6: Sina

I am coming from southern Iran where people are having a different skin color. We look different from the people from other parts of Iran. I remember when we had a discussion on diversity in Iran my classmates began to become more cautious about their opinions. I now feel that my classmates know about this diversity more. I am now more confident about this diversity and I think we should respect this.

Moreover, the findings obtained from the students' presentation during the second semester showed some evidence for some sorts of change, that is, from believing in ethnocentrism to admitting more intercultural awareness and respect for other cultures and ethnicities. As an example, one of the students presented a lecture on a short story she had read and the ensuing discussion in class showed that the majority had become more alert about cultural and ethnic diversity in the world. In a post-course interview, one of the students said that:

Interview Extract 7: Mohammad

Before I signed up for this class, I think I was less aware of other cultures and my knowledge of different cultures was limited to my city and friends. After the course, I gained more knowledge about different cultures and learnt to respect them….We also talked about these topics after the class.

Furthermore, another student referred to a similar point in her journal. Maryam believed that prior to the commencement of the first semester, she had some classmates in her technical courses from border cities in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan provinces who speak a different language and were most of the time stereotyped and stigmatised by other peer classmates from Tehran. After the discussion in class and the presentations by one of her classmates about the beauty of this linguistic and cultural diversity in Iran, Maryam felt she was more open to this diversity and regretted not having valued this diversity before. She said in her journal that:

Journal Entry 5

We read some stories in this class and had some hot discussions which helped me think more seriously about the sources of prejudice in me and other friends. The story of Hazara people in Afghanistan [The Kite Runner]

made me think more about this.

This rising awareness was also seen in the ethnographic fieldnotes kept by the course instructor. In one of the fieldnotes, there was a note which showed that students were reluctant to voice their opinions about other ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural minorities in Iran. They were not comfortable to express their opinions and they preferred to remain silent or speak very cautiously about these minorities in the world. However, as the course evolved, this disinclination turned into a more open tendency to verbalize their true intentions and thoughts about the diversity in Iran and, of course, the world. One of the students who was a devout Muslim and an active member of the Islamic society of the university readily rejected religious diversity but it was interesting to see that he also developed a milder and more positive attitude towards this diversity in the society. This ethnographic observation was an interesting piece of evidence to show how students developed more compassion and sympathy for diversity in the society.

Acknowledgement of Minorities and Unheard Voices

Participatory observation of the class showed that students became more tolerant of the diversity around them as the course evolved. As an illustration, Parviz, one of the students, gave a lecture on ethnic minorities in Iran. Two of the students were initially negative about some minorities who have historically been portrayed as separatist in the Iranian culture. However, the ensuing discussions changed their views and made them aware of the existence, presence, and the challenges of these minorities in the great country of Iran. These courses could create a new space for hearing the unheard voices as they could become the central topic for class discussions. Examples were also mentioned about other minorities in other parts of the world and how they are treated. The Maoris in New Zealand were mentioned as a good example of how they are respected and given voice in New Zealand. These examples further raised the awareness of the students regarding the place of these groups in the world. Another lecture by Fateme, one of the students, was presented in the Reading Comprehension course during which some of these conflicting views were resolved. One of the students in her journal had written that:

> **Journal Entry 6**
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> *I was born and have been living in Tehran and have had little contact with students from minorities in Iran. But since I started this course, I got to*

know some classmates from other language, ethnic, and religious minorities. I confess that I did not have a positive attitude towards religions in the world but since I listened to one of my classmate's lecture about religious minorities in Iran and abroad, I have attempted to respect these religions even if I do not agree with them all.

Mahsa, in her interview (Extract 8), stated that she had stereotypical views about minorities, which were changed after her participation in these two courses because she became more knowledgeable about the status of minorities. Susan also revealed in her interviews that some of the sessions and the discussions therein had been very informative for her. She stated that she had not been to any such courses before and the course contents, especially some of the stories, had been very influential in forming her attitude towards certain critical concepts in the society. She specifically referred to the life of Malala Yousafzai and the impact that Malala had on her. She believed that reading the lives of such people can be very illuminating for students, especially young adults. In her interview with the course instructor, she said that:

Interview Extract 8: Mahsa

I should say that I am very sorry for the stereotypical views I had about other people….I can see this change in my classmates too.

All the above-cited sources of data confirm the effect that the two courses had on the students' views about peace. In other words, the findings obtained from the interview at the end of the Reading Comprehension course supported the findings observed in the students' lectures and discussions. Being in line with the theoretical framework formulated by McInnis and Wells (1994), the findings of the present study highlight the importance of knowledge of self, others, and the world for creating a peaceful world, where people empathize with minorities, tolerate differences, go beyond their stereotypical views, and respect nature. Likewise, in her study on teaching war literature for teaching peace, Powers (2007) indicates that peace education through reading literary works involves providing knowledge. While Powers' (2007) study mainly focuses on knowledge about challenges and problems caused by war, the findings of this study show the value of self-knowledge, knowledge of the local world, or even environmental knowledge. Our participants explained that the literary works proposed in this study enriched their

knowledge of self and the world. As Zembylas (2018) argues, all peace education programs, including critical, post-colonial, and de-colonial ones "share common goals in calling attention to local context amidst larger cultural and political realities in developing strategies for producing peace knowledge as resistance and enacting transformative agency for liberation and social change" (p. 2).

Carter (2008) also refers to self-knowledge as one of the most important themes of multicultural programs of peace education, which seeks to promote inclusiveness and diversities. In addition, Joyce (2020) regards self-knowledge as the search for inner peace and an attempt to connect with society and the global world. Joyce indicates that awareness of and reflection on self can encourage us to 'stay attendant to the inner truths of ourselves as energy and source' (p. 12). She believes that being attendant to the inner truths of one's own self is an important step towards transformations. Illuminating the role of language educators in teaching for peace, Kruger (2012) suggests that deeper knowledge of self is important, "as development of self-awareness is proportionate to the development of the capacity to show empathy and tolerance towards others" (p. 21).

Moreover, the participants of this study asserted that the proposed literary works helped them think about their stereotypical opinions about various groups of people, who are regarded as minorities or marginalised groups because of their different religions, ethnicities, or languages. In this way, they could hear the voices, which were previously unheard. This finding was consistent with Hirsch's (2006) argument about reducing stereotyping for teaching peace in conflict areas. In a similar vein, Powers (2007) argues that reading literary texts helps learners challenge the traditionally-formed interpretations and understandings because alternative visions of the existing conditions of human life are illustrated for readers of the texts.

In addition, despite the cultural and economic differences, the present study focused on challenging the stereotypical views about others which is in line with the goal of peace education programs in Scandinavian countries, which seek to raise people's awareness about the unpleasant conditions that people have in poor countries rather than judging the differences of these people as negative points. Our participants talked about knowledge of others, which as mentioned by Kruger (2012), will offer a positive atmosphere for interaction and understanding of cross-

cultural differences in language education. Actually, recommending ecphrastic poetry, Gorrell (2000) points out that teaching empathy should be the key goal of peace curriculum. The participant learners also talked about peace with nature. As Harris (2004) argues, 'study of the environment leads to holistic thinking about how natural and human systems interrelate' (p. 14). Generally speaking, the findings of this study call the attentions of peace scholars and educators to the value of knowledge at individual, social, and environmental level for teaching peace in Iran, as a country in the Middle East. The findings obtained here corroborate the findings from Hirsch (2006), who also reported two educational projects in which storytelling through a bibliotherapy method and identity construction through dilemma presentation in stories were found effective in peace development. In both of these two projects Hirsch (2006) emphasizes the role of stories in enhancing empathy and social contact with the other.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings showed that the students had become more conscious of peace values at the end of the second course. In other words, the intervention used through the integration of literary texts instigated rising awareness among the students regarding peace values. Moreover, students had very positive attitudes towards the topics discussed. They believed that the presence of such courses, especially for science and engineering students who are less exposed to social sciences, should be obligatory. In brief, the findings obtained from these two peace-based courses revealed that the students were generally in favour of the course and its contents. Similar courses can be also offered in other subject areas and for other age groups by considering the load of materials and their content level. Such courses can bring changes in the attitudes of students and make them more sympathetic and peaceful individuals. Such courses can also lever peace values in the society and make the world a better place for people. By incorporating peace-related contents in our classes, we have better served socially just teaching in our profession. In this way, we have taught not only the language but also the tool and contents essential for social responsibility and consciousness.

With the mass migration of refugees from conflict regions to other countries, the value of peace education becomes of more significance. Children in

war-stricken regions, such as Yemen, Ukraine, and Syria, are more in need of such education. This research, like any other previous ones on peace education, is not devoid of some limitations. One major issue that should be taken into account very cautiously is that the findings obtained from this longitudinal research were based on students' interviews. Although one of the researchers was also teaching the course and had observed them during the two semesters, the findings were more dominantly based on the students' attitudes either in their interviews or their journal entries. Moreover, the students in the current research were from a university in the city of Tehran. We should do further research in other educational contexts, including language institutes, and with other age groups to further explore the role of peace education.

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