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THE SILENT DISARMERS: WHAT L1 HABITS DO TO FL SUCCESS

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As interesting as it may seem, I started reading in Persian—my L1—since I was a five-year-old child. The first books which my mother read to me were great literary books from outstanding Persian thinkers of the classical period (7th to 18th centuries). She used to read them aloud, at my bedtime, so that I might become familiar with Persian culture—and, probably, socially appropriate ways of conduct. However, she was not aware of the destructive effects these books could possibly have on my foreign language (FL) reading and writing in the years to come; I myself was not aware of their effects either.

Most of these books are still considered, by lay people and professionals alike, to be masterpieces of outstanding poets and writers of ancient Iran. There is, however, something about these books that bothers me. Almost all of them were written by authors who had been educated in traditional schools commonly known as *Maktabkhaneh*. In these schools, teachers (commonly known as *Mullahs*) used to teach students how to read and write. Owing much of their knowledge to arcane traditions and schools of thought, these mullahs followed a unique frozen teaching methodology, one based on the ideology that 'you should get your students accept what you say, no matter how illogical it might be'. Very often, these mullahs resorted to logical fallacies to get their points accepted by their students. Comparing totally unrelated things, taking correlations to mean causation, basing their arguments on miracles, etc. were only a few of the techniques that these mullahs did, and still do, use to 'train' their students.



As you may have already noticed, some of their students graduated, became authors of literary books, and implemented the same techniques in their works—which were often of a didactic nature and meant to raise civic virtues in their audience; and this vicious cycle gathered exponential momentum and size. Lots of books emerged a critical evaluation of most of which (including works by Rudaki, Marvazi, Sa'di, and others) reveals that they (a) lack clear rhetorical organization, (b) are full of pompous words and phrases, (c) sugarcoat logical fallacies for the audience, and so on. More specifically, they do not use headings and subheadings for the organization of content, nor do they employ paragraphs as basic units of composition. In fact, long stretches of running text with no clear paragraph boundaries are common in these works. More importantly, where there are headings and subheadings, rarely do they relate to the texts that appear under them.

Now, think about what happens to a student who receives twelve years education based on these books. Also imagine how sad the situation can be if the same teacher who teaches reading also teaches composition—the teacher who thinks pompous words and figures of speech are the backbone of academic writing, someone who does not care about paragraphs, their unity, their rhetorical organization, and the way they should be developed.

The products of such an educational system will unknowingly develop L1 reading and writing habits, and systems of 'pseudo-logical' argumentation, that are carried over to FL classrooms. Very often, these habits are already internalized and fossilized, and are not easily eradicable. No matter how hard the FL teacher tries to demolish them, they will linger on in the poor student.

My own experience shows that, even when the individual knows about these wrong habits, he often fails to avoid them when he is involved in performing a linguistic task. I myself, for example, have unknowingly learnt to disregard headings and subheadings in materials I read. I know that these are tools that writers use to draw readers' attention to the main ideas of their texts; More importantly, I have been teaching reading and writing over the past fifteen years, and have always emphasized these points in my classes. Yet, as peculiar as it may seem, I do not read headings and subheadings when I am reading in English. The situation is so strange as if these



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headings and subheadings were not out there at all. Even worse than this, I do not 'see' newspaper headlines as if the publishers have forgotten to put them in their newspapers. In writing, too, I often fail to use headings and subheadings to organize my work.

I have been thinking about this habit for a long time, and have continually noticed that this habit has its origins in my pre-university education. My mother ignited it and my teachers added fuel to it; the books were the fuel. All of them were silent disarmers that had one job to do: to silently disarm me in the foreign language.