

Mitt persiska alfabet



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Examinator – Eva Engstrand
Assessing teacher – Lotta Kvist
Supervisor – Eva Dahlin

My Persian alphabet

Charlotte Askari

Abstract

The goal of this project has been to boost the earliest stages of literacy development in children bilingual in Swedish and Persian.

My Persian alphabet has been created to serve as a tool that will help children recognize the capital (isolated) letters of the Persian script and be able to sound them. It aims at de-dramatizing the Persian script both in terms of level of difficulty and perceived cultural distance, encouraging the children to interact with it. In using this tool, hopefully the child will think that the Persian alphabet is neither that different from the latin one nor difficult.

The components of *My Persian alphabet* are a poster and a box of letter cards. They help the emergent reader to relate to the shapes of the Persian alphabet and learn the sounds of the letters, using the transference of phonological skills between alphabets.

Keywords

Illustration, Literacy, Bilingualism, Orthography, Phonology

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1 Purpose, goal and background

1.1 Background

More than three million Iranians are living abroad¹. In Sweden there were 2012 more than 65 600 people born in Iran living in Sweden². With spouses and children that makes plenty of Swedes with connection to the Persian language. Hence there is a big group of young children learning Persian as a minority language (that is they are learning a language not commonly spoken in their country of habitat) with little outside support. They are exposed to the Persian language mainly at home, with their extended family, and/or connection to the Persian community. Through their home environment some of them also interact with the Persian language through media sources such as Persian websites, Youtube, Iranian broadcast through Internet, satellite TV programs, local radio, books, etc.

Learning a language includes both listening comprehension, oral language and reading development. But when it comes to educational tools to support reading development in Persian there are very limited material at hand.

Bilingual children learning Persian as a minority language has different needs than native speakers of Persian language, not at least because they learn the language through different sources and in a different cultural setting. Therefore, heritage language teaching requires tools and materials different from those taught in primary schools in Iran. So supporting Swedish/Persian children with suitable instructional material for reading development is a big challenge.

1.2 Goal

The goal of this project has been to boost the earliest stages of literacy development in children who besides Swedish also have Persian as parental tongue. To achieve this, I have worked within the frame work of the research question: “How can one make young emergent readers intrigued by the Persian alphabet?”

My main target group is Swedish/Persian children in their preschool years. I chose this as an age span since this is an age of emergent literary interest of children, when they are curious of letters and the focus will be primarily on reading as decoding (for example ability to name letters). But since the context where they learn Persian is a mainly Swedish speaking one, I find it important to include also young children learning “only” Swedish in the research question, since I believe that the attitudes towards the Persian alphabet of their monolingual Swedish friends will be vital for the children’s will to adapt it.

¹ Sedighi, A. (2010). Teaching Persian to Heritage Speakers. *Iranian Studies*, 43:5, 683-697.

² SCB. (2013) Utrikes födda i riket efter födelseland, ålder och kön. År 2000-2012. Statistikdatabasen.

1.3 Purpose

My purpose with this project has been to develop a tool that will help children recognize the capital (isolated) letters of the Persian script and be able to sound them. This tool should de-dramatize the Persian script both in terms of level of difficulty and perceived cultural distance, encouraging the children to interact with it. In using this tool, hopefully the child will think that the Persian alphabet is neither that different from the latin one nor difficult.

2 Research analysis and conclusions

2.1 Characteristics of the Persian script

Persian is the official language of Iran and is a representative of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European linguistic family. It is written in a slightly modified form of the Arabic script, adding four letters to the Arabic alphabet to a total of 32 (figure 2.1). It is written from right to left.¹ The Persian script does not have a graphic representation for all of the vowels. When Persian is educated to beginners, the short vowels are shown in the words which diacritics that are places above or below the consonants. Later on, when the reader gets more skilled in reading Persian the helping diacritics are omitted and the reader can by her-/himself read out the word, either from an understanding of the context or from an automatic visual word recognition.² Another feature of the Persian script is that one sound might have numerous graphic representations. For example, there are four letters for the sound /z/.

Figure 2.1: The letters of the Persian alphabet

ا ب پ ت ث ج چ ح خ د ذ
ر ز ژ س ش ص ض ط ظ
ع غ ف ق ک گ ل م ن و ه ی

2.2 Development of literacy

Cracking the code of the alphabetic principle

To become literate is not an easy task. In languages that uses alphabetic scripts, the writing system is made up of letters, the letters in their turn signify sounds, and those sounds are combined into meaningful words.

Perfetti and Marron (1998) describes how the child's discovery of the so called alphabetic principle is an essential key to gain literacy. To understand the alphabetic principle is to understand that the writing system encodes the child's language by associating meaningless graphic units (graphemes – the smallest semantically distinguishing unit such as a letter, ligature, digit or a punctuation mark) to meaningless units of language (phonemes – the smallest linguistic unit of sound: /k/, /ã/, /sch/, etc.)³

Neither for a child nor an adult, it is an obvious discovery that units of writing can be connected to meaningless units of speech.

¹ Thackstone, W. M. (1983). *An introduction to Persian*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

² Geva, E. & Gholamain, M. (1999). Orthographic and Cognitive Factors in the Concurrent Development of Basic Reading Skills in English and Persian. *Language Learning* 49:2, 183-217

³ Perfetti, C. A. & Marron, M. A. (1998). Learning to read: Literacy acquisition by children and adults. In D. A. Wagner (Ed.), *Advances in adult literacy research and development*. Hampton Press.

First, you have to notice that spoken language contains meaningless segments – phonemes – and that these segments can be used in producing speech and understanding it. When you have come to an explicit recognition that speech contains these segments you need to discover that one might let some graphic mark stand for these meaningless segment, such as "T" or "M". Relatively few preschool children are able to demonstrate an awareness of phonemes despite showing awareness of syllables.³

Letters as visual forms

The alphabetic principle may be a complex one, but children have an elementary view of letters. They think of them as pictures. Bialystok (2002) writes that even after the time that children know the elements of the alphabet, such as being able to name the letters, their knowledge of those forms may not be represented as a functional symbolic system. Instead, children think of letters as visual forms. If they relate at all to the meanings of the text or words they recognize, it is through some perceptual feature of the letters such as their size, shape or numerosity.⁴ This is until the child establishes the letters of the alphabet as symbolic knowledge capable of representing meanings.

Speed of letter naming as predictor or reading skills

When the child becomes literate, it has cracked the code of the alphabetic principle and developed an ability to manage cognitive processes such as verbal working memory and speed of letter naming⁵. This means that the reader must be able to retain specific words in his/hers working memory, while retrieving relevant information about the pronunciation and meaning. The speed of letter naming reflects the conversion of orthographic information into phonological representations.

Many researchers have pointed out the role of speed of letter naming as an important cognitive factor contributing to reading fluency⁶. Slow letter-naming speed has been found to be one of the strongest predictors of reading problems with children and adults alike.

The study of Geva and Gholamain (1999) both confirms the crucial role of automatized speed of letter naming when it comes to basic reading skills, and also shows that later on when the child has learned all the letters and learned the grapheme-phoneme conversion rules they were able to read unfamiliar Persian words of varying length almost as accurately as the familiar words.⁵

4 Bialystok, E. (2002). Acquisition of Literacy in Bilingual Children: A Framework for Research. *Language Learning*, 52:1, 159-199.

5 Geva, E. & Gholamain, M. (1999). Orthographic and Cognitive Factors in the Concurrent Development of Basic Reading Skills in English and Persian. *Language Learning*, 49:2, 183-217.

6 See for example:

Bowers, P. G., Golden, J., Kennedy, A. & Young, A. (1994). Limits upon orthographic knowledge indexed by naming speed. In V. W. Berninger (Ed.), *The varieties of orthographic knowledge I: Theoretical and developmental issues*. (173-218) Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Denckla, M. B. & Rudel, R. G. (1976). Rapid automatized naming (R.A.N.): Dyslexia differentiated from other learning disabilities. *Neuropsychologia*, 14, 471-479.

Fawcett, A. J. & Nicolson, R. I. (1994). Naming speed in children with dyslexia. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 27, 641-646.

Wolf, M., Pfeil, C., Lotz, R. & Biddle, K. (1994). Towards a more universal understanding of the developmental dyslexias: The contribution of orthographic factors. In W. V. Berninger (Ed.), *The varieties of orthographic knowledge I: Theoretical and developmental issues*. (131-171) Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Transference of phonological skills between alphabets

Bilingualism gives the advantage of potential transfer of reading principles across the languages. This transfer is facilitated if the two languages are written in the same system (both based on an alphabetic principle), enabling children to transfer the strategies and expertise that they build up in one of the languages.⁷

Bialystok, Luk & Kwan's (2009) interpretation of others and own studies of how bilingualism contributes to children's early acquisition of literacy is that already having learned how to read in one language gives a general understanding of reading and its basis in a symbolic system of print.

Both Bialystok (2002) and Bialystok, Luk & Kwan (2005) refers to lots of studies where transfer across two languages of bilingual children has been shown. The majority of this research has been conducted with children learning two alphabetic systems, and most of these studies have reported positive transfer of phonological skills across languages for bilinguals.

The extent to which children transfer their skill in one language to another depends on the similarity of the systems, phonological structure in one case and writing system in the other.⁸

Conclusions regarding development of literacy

From the research mentioned above, I draw the following conclusions:

- To become literate, the child has to understand letters as graphic units representing linguistic units, capable of creating words.
- This is a complex discovery, that relatively few preschool children are able to demonstrate an awareness of.
- The skill of converting the graphic units into phonological representation is reflected through speed of letter naming.
- Speed of letter-naming has been found to be one of the strongest predictors of reading skills with children and adults alike.
- Helping the child develop its phonological skill in speed of letter naming will strongly benefit his/hers reading development.
- Phonological skills can be transferred across alphabets.
- Children think of letters as pictures.

2.3 Language attitudes

Persian is an unfamiliar language to the majority of the Swedes. Apart from that it is spoken in Iran that is geographically distant from Sweden, it is the language of a country that differs in terms of culture and tradition.

Lars-Gunnar Andersson (1985) established the term "principle of status", as a mean to explain peoples attitudes towards the dialect in which a language is spoken. It

⁷ Bialystok, E., Luk, G. & Kwan, E (2005). Bilingualism, Biliteracy, and Learning to Read: Interactions Among Languages and Writing Systems. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 9:1, 43-61.

⁸ Bialystok, E., Luk, G. & Kwan, E (2005). Bilingualism, Biliteracy, and Learning to Read: Interactions Among Languages and Writing Systems. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 9:1, 43-61.

suggests that a speaker will appreciate and try to adapt the dialect that is used by people with the highest status.⁹ Subsequent studies shows that the same principle can be applied to languages as a whole; the languages spoken in the countries of highest social and economic status will be the most appreciated ones.¹⁰

A vast load of studies has been made showing how people tend to judge people differently depending on what language they are speaking. A striking finding is at what an early age this prejudice against languages is developed. Children raised in bilingual environments are already at the age of three aware of differences between languages. And more so – they have already themselves started to develop attitudes toward this.¹¹

When it comes to attitudes in Sweden towards different language, most of the research conducted has been regarding the relationship of the Swedish and Finnish languages. But in 1999, Andersson performed a survey where she investigated attitudes to one's one language plus three other languages, including Persian. The respondents had either Swedish, English, Finnish or Persian as mother tongue.¹²

In the study of Andersson (1999), the result shows that Persian is perceived as more foreign than the other non-Swedish languages included in the study (English and Finnish). Persian is also seen as the least universal language. Persian speakers are thought of as being less modern, making less money and having lower social status than speakers of Swedish, English and Finnish. Surprisingly, even the Persian speakers themselves places both English and Swedish before their one mother tongue when it comes to universality, modernity, economy and status.

Conclusions regarding language attitudes

Even though the study of Andersson (1999) was performed more than ten years ago, according to the principle of status the results are still valid. Persian is the language of a country geographically distant and culturally different from Sweden, whereas Sweden who already has the upper hand of having its language spoken and taught by the majority, is more economically developed than Iran – economic status that is so tightly interlaced with social status. According to IMF 2008 estimates, Iran's GDP (PPP) per capita were about two thirds of the size of Sweden's (figure 2.2).

To motivate a child to embrace the Persian alphabet, these issues have to be addressed. Because the attitudes towards languages exists both amongst the speaking and nonspeaking of the Persian language, my research question "How can one make young emergent readers intrigued by the Persian alphabet?" is formulated towards children in general, since my belief is that the overall attitude towards the language in society has a strong impact on children's will to adapt it.

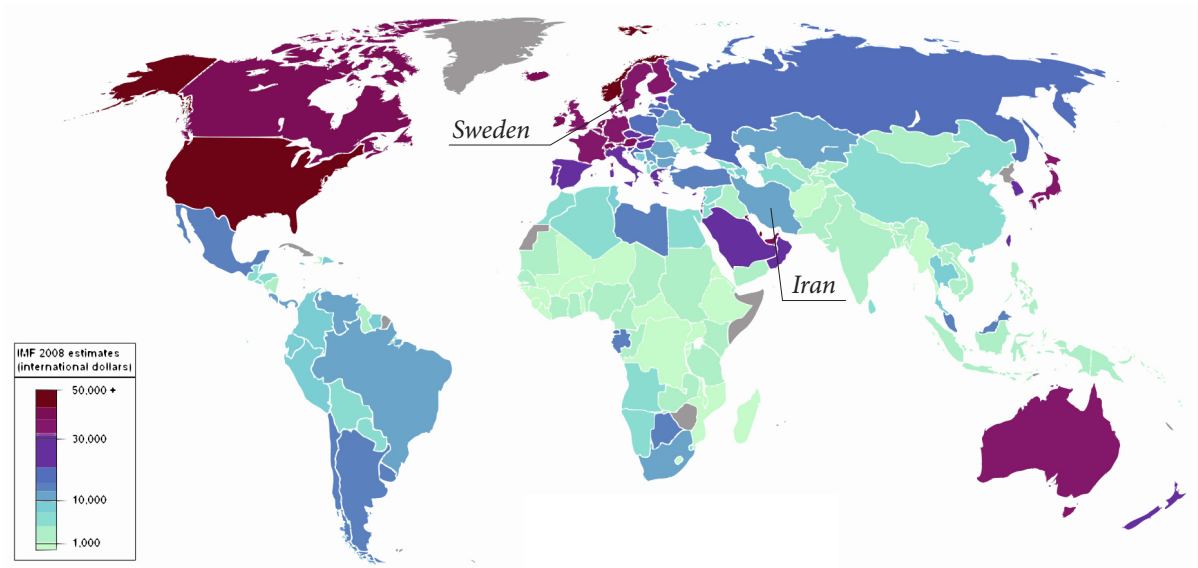
9 Andersson, L-G. (1985). *Fult språk*. Stockholm: Carlssons förlag.

10 See for example: Andersson, M. (1999). *En undersökning av attityder till eget och andras språk hos individer med svenska, engelska, finska och persiska som modersmål*. Stockholm: Institutionen för nordiska språk, Stockholms universitet.

11 Day, R. R. (1982) Children's attitudes toward language. In E. B. Ryan & H. Giles (Ed.), *Attitudes towards Language Variation. Social and Applied Contexts* (116-131). London: Edward Arnold. S.

12 Andersson, M. (1999). *En undersökning av attityder till eget och andras språk hos individer med svenska, engelska, finska och persiska som modersmål*. Stockholm: Institutionen för nordiska språk, Stockholms universitet.

Figure 2.2: GDP (PPP) nominal per capita¹³



¹³ File:GDP nominal per capita world map IMF 2008.png (June 26, 2009). In Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved May 11, 2013, from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GDP_nominal_per_capita_world_map_IMF_2008.png. Data from International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook Database April 2009

3 Presentation of project result and process

3.1 Starting point

Not only has the Swedish language a head start in terms of usage and exposure, as I perceived it the educational material for literacy acquisition in Swedish targeting kids were much more inviting and attractive than the Persian equivalent.

Addressing children

In the Swedish literature, there is a tradition of addressing kids as both playful and mischievous figures (for example "Pippi Långstrump", "Krakel Spektakel" and "Den vilda bebin"). The children in the stories are playing, quarreling, fighting, pooping and they take delight in silly and crazy situations. This is a tradition that as I see it reflects on to the design of educational material for emergent readers. The visual language is bright, bold and playful and addresses the children in a permitting and inviting way.

Iran has a strong tradition of fables. Often, the main characters are animals, the illustrations are a bit more grown up as in beautiful aquarelles and abstract paintings. The stories are often concluded with an explicit moral. The educational books for emergent readers portraits kids in – according to my opinion – a more moderate palette as well behaved children sitting at their school desks studying.

My original plan was to apply some of that permitting, crazy attitude that I found in the Swedish design to an educational material on the Persian script. By doing this I hoped to create an intriguing material that would attract children to the Persian letters.

As a format, I was drawn to the graphic alphabet poster for children's room since I find it is an excellent tool for getting to know the different letters. It has an integrated part in the child's daily environment, and parent and child can look and talk about it during for example bed time story time. For the letters of the latin alphabet there are an abundance of posters and wallpapers to hang in your child's room, but when it comes to the Persian alphabet the situation is quite the opposite. There are quite a few prints of the Arabic alphabet but next to none of the Persian.

How to motivate the child to embrace the Persian script

Parallel to this, I was occupied with the notion of how tightly the child's motivation to embrace an alphabet is to how other people respond towards the script and language in question. Reading the study of Andersson (1999) where the Persian speakers were thought of as being less modern, making less money and having lower social status made me reflect upon my own intent.¹

Andersson (1999) writes that when one is working with attitudes towards languages, one has to take into account that behind each language there is a

¹ Andersson, M. (1999). *En undersökning av attityder till eget och andras språk hos individer med svenska, engelska, finska och persiska som modersmål*. Stockholm: Institutionen för nordiska språk, Stockholms universitet.

group of people that identifies itself with the language in question. But instead of respecting this, I was about to mimic the culture of educating the latin alphabet and just add it on to the Persian. Wasn't this nothing but a strong signal to the child that the latin way was the preferable one? But it would be another thing if I treated both of the alphabets in the same way, mimic the Persian for the latin and vice versa. And a step further yet would be not to take side for any of them, but to look in to how one could interlace the two. This was the road I decided to pursue.

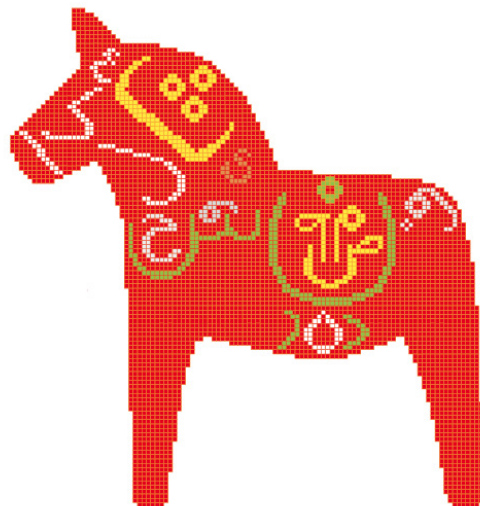
3.2 Similarities in cultural heritage

My response to all of this was to try to make a natural connection between the Persian and Swedish.

I started out with exploring the similarities in the visual language of Sweden and Iran's cultural heritage. For example, there is a striking resemblance between the Swedish rörlakan and the Persian kelim, between the Swedish kurbits and the Persian script, and between both composition and choice of symbolic icons in Swedish and Persian textiles.

Since the visual language is so similar I started out with experimenting with the kurbits that is thought of as being so uniquely Swedish, with the presumption that it could as well be Persian. This led to the creation of the Alpha horse (figure 3.1), an embroidered Dalahäst were the decorative pattern was constituted by one of each of the shapes of the Persian script.

Figure 3.1: Embroidery pattern for the Alpha horse



With this horse as center piece I started working on a pattern for a "märkduk" (a traditional Swedish embroidered cloth were the alphabet is an distinctive decorative element), with the Persian letters embroidered (figure 3.2). This I mirrored against an other print of a photograph from Iran with the latin letters. The photo shows a grandfather working in his garden, so my thought was to let the Dalahäst and the grandfather represent different branches of two heritages. I also wanted to show on the similarities between the two origins, to make each of the piece as being possible either Swedish or Persian.

Figure 3.2: Mirroring alphabets



Besides from this solution being far to family oriented from my part, it also manifested an imbalance between the symbols chosen in each piece. The Dalahäst is a commonly used symbol for Sweden and for the tourists it is the souvenir most purchased. It is such a generic symbol for Sweden that it needed to be balanced against an equally strong symbol for Iran. My response to this was to omit the latin alphabet, focusing merely on the Persian one and elaborate the pattern of the embroidered cloth (figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Embroidered cloth with the Persian alphabet



Figure 3.3 shows how I added three children to the horse and in the pattern of the children and the horse all the letters of the Persian script were interlaced. The way the letters were hidden in the pattern was supposed to engage the viewer in seeking them out and relate to their shapes as common forms. At the top, I placed the alphabet showing the letters as both isolated and joined, high lighting the unjoinable ones.

Still unable to break out of the family zone to a more general design solution, I had also lost track of the key words that I used to describe my projects visual identity with – playful, vivid and modern.

3.3 Exploring themes of literacy acquisition

To get back on track again, I returned to my research question "How can one make young emergent readers intrigued by the Persian alphabet?", adding to it a personal reflection that it should give the child self confidence in making use of the Persian language without the need to make a statement. For my own part, I could try to make as many statements as I wanted regarding to the perceived value of different origins, but a child should not have to.

For my next try, I decided to explore the advantages of having both the Swedish and the Persian visual heritage as a form of doubleness instead of a duality, looking for what the hybrid between them would look like. I also reminded myself of the pedagogic side of my purpose – to develop a tool to help emergent readers in their earliest stages of becoming literate.

Once again, I went back to my research. This time to the in my option three most interesting findings in my theoretical research on the acquisition of reading skills:

- Speed of letter naming is a strong predictor of reading abilities
- Children think of letters as visual forms
- Children display an early awareness of language attitudes

I decided to treat each of the three as a theme and explore them within the format of a graphic poster of the easy to display 50 x 70 cm format.

Poster nr 1: Letter naming

The first theme, speed of letter naming, I approached with a phonetic solution that would translate the Persian letters into their Swedish equivalents (figure 3.4).

Next to the Persian letter of /a/ – "ا", I placed the latin letter of "A". In the cases that there were none latin letter corresponding to the sound of the Persian, I used a picture of a common word in Persian starting with that sound.

Figure 3.4: Scetch of phonetic translation



By doing so, I addressed the following obstacles in reading out Persian letters:

Even if Persian is the parents mother tongue, that does not automatically means that he/she can read in the Persian script. Many Persian-speakers write Persian only with latin letters, for example "salaam" instead of سلام (Persian for "hello"). So even if you are native in Persian, you might not be able to read out the Persian letters for your child. Translating the Persian letters to Swedish ones would therefor be helpful.

But since not every letter has a sound equivalent (the letter خ for example translates in to the phonetic sound of [kh]), these letters had to be treated in another way. There is also a difference in how educational books translates Persian into phonetic Latin (some text books indicates the long vowel of /a/ in salaam with an ā ("salām") and some uses the ā to indicate the short vowel ("sālam")). The text book phonetic in its turn differs from the everyday spelling of phonetic Persian (when you write the word "aunt" in Persian with latin letters you write "khale", but the text book phonetic spell "xale"). The usage of pictures of well known words starting with the Persian letter was therefor a way to avoid confusion. But the choice of images also meant that that the viewer had to have a basic understanding of Persian glossary to be able to sound out the letters.

For an older reader that has understood the alphabetic principle, the phonetic poster solution could also be a tool for possible transfer of phonological skills.²

As for the choice of visual appearance, I played with the resemblance between the Persian letters and vintage Latin letters. For the illustrations, I was assisted by my daughter and a friend of hers. The latter helped out with the chicken and my daughter used her fingers to paint shapes that were used for the food and the train (figure 3.5).

² Bialystok, E., Luk, G. & Kwan, E (2005). Bilingualism, Biliteracy, and Learning to Read: Interactions Among Languages and Writing Systems. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 9:1, 43-61.

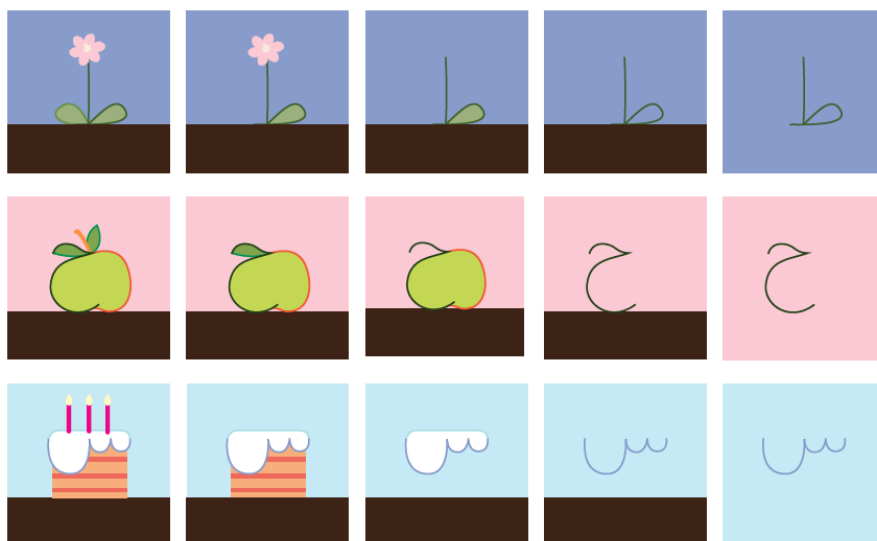
Figure 3.5: Final version of Poster nr 1 Letter naming



Poster nr 2: Visual form

For this theme, I went back to a previous experiment where I had hidden the shape of the letter in a picture, then step by step revealing the letter (figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6: Sketches of revealing letters hidden in pictures



This time, I focused on the letter shape only, trying to find out what it in its one merits looked like. The letter ت was suddenly a man in a mustache, the گ a measuring tool and a pen, the ز a sausage, and so on (figure 3.7).

Figure 3.7: Sketches of letters as pictures of every day shapes



All letters of the alphabet was thus represented by an image in a color scheme inspired by old Persian prints from the classic tale of Khelileh and Demneh.

In this solution, the image of a pen was to be seen as the letter "A", the image of a banana as the letter "B" etc. The only connection between the original letter and the image was the resemblance in shape (figure 3.8). My thought was that since the child in its earliest stages of literary development relates to the letters as images without making the connection between the sound of /b/ and the first letter in "banana"³, the child's possibility to relate to the shape of the letter would be the most important aspect.

Figure 3.8: Final version of Poster nr 2 Visual form



3 Perfetti, C. A. & Marron, M. A. (1998) Learning to read: Literacy acquisition by children and adults. In D. A. Wagner (Ed.), *Advances in adult literacy research and development*. Hampton Press.

Poster nr 3: Language attitudes

I still wasn't ready to let go of the Alpha horse, so I remodeled it into a pixelated horse and thus kept the inspiration from the embroidered cloth. I placed the horse on a photo from Iran and filled the kurbits letter shapes with other photos from visits there. Doing this, my intention was to interlace the strong Swedish symbol of the Dalahäst with Iran, showing that it might as well has a Persian sibling. Iran might be geographically distant but in reality it is not that different. Over the horse I "embroidered" the isolated shapes of the Persian alphabet, under the horse I placed the joined letters (figure 3.9).

This poster had some major problems. For one part the composition as in what to look at. Then the fact that the format 50 x 70 cm was way to small for the viewer to comprehend the content of the pictures that composed the kurbits letter shapes. It didn't speak to the target group of children at all, and lastly even an adult audience would have a hard time understanding the meaning of it without an explanatory note.

Figure 3.9: Version and close up of poster try-out for Language attitudes



So at last I said good bye to the Alpha horse, and focused primarily on the letters. I mimicked the embroidered cloth ones again but this time in a more up to date style, using both the patterns of the Persian carpets and the allmoge tradition as inspiration in composing the letters. As a final of the alphabet I placed a flower, created from a pattern in a Persian carpet but which as well could be of an allmoge origin. Since many of the sounds in the Persian script have numerous graphic representations, I high lighted the similar sounds by giving them the same color combination – all of the /z/s were purple, all of the /s/s were red and yellow, etc. All letters with separate sounds had their own unique color combination (figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10: Final version of Poster nr 3 Language attitudes



Packaging

The serie of the three posters I named *My Persian alphabet* to enhance the feeling for the child that the Persian script is in fact something that belongs to him/her as well. No matter if you speak Persian or not, everyone is allowed to explore it. For packaging of these posters I created a tube solutions that would be both display friendly, show on a coherent serie, and show the special features of each of the separate posters (figure 3.11).

The upper part of the tube hence showed the name of product (*My Persian alphabet*), content (that it was an alphabet poster, its measurement and a short copy) and gave an indication of the visual appearance of the poster. With this composition the tubes could be placed in either a canister or on a shelf and still explain its content. On the lower part of the tube I placed the Persian alphabet, and in each column I changed some of the letters into the features they had on that particular poster.

Figure 3.11: Packaging solution for poster serie My Persian alphabet



3.4 Problems needed to be addressed

The poster serie *My persian alphabet* faced some major problems that needed to be addressed:

- If one were to purchase one of these for a children's room, which one of them were one to chose? Could they be combined in to one poster?
- Could this poster serie claim to be a pedagogic tool in means of boosting a child's emergent literacy?
- The images were in many cases jammed into the 50 x 70 cm format, hardly allowed to breath. I was thus entreated to break the poster format.

3.5 Final result – My Persian alphabet

Facing these issues, I decided to start with a process of merging the three posters into one. From each poster I picked the best feature – the phonological translation from poster 1, the usage of the resemblance between letters and everyday items as a mean to relate to the letters visual appearance in poster 2, and the high lighting of similar sounds by giving them the same visual treatment in poster 3.

Then I connected each letter of the Persian alphabet to an image of a resembling shape of the letter, an image portraying something that started with the same sound in Swedish.

For example the Persian letter of /b/ – ب – was as before in poster 2 connected to the shape of a banana. But this time because the word for banana also starts with the sound /b/ in Swedish. In this way I treated all of the letters that had a sound equivalent in the beginning of Swedish words. For the Persian letters that didn't have an equivalent in a Swedish letter, I used the phonological sound of the letter: The Persian letter ش that pronounces /sch/ was illustrated with waves that sound /sch/.

Because many of the Persian letters share their main shape with others and uses placement and numerosity of dots to separate them, I found it important for the images to relate to the dots in a distinct way. This would serve as a help to remember what shape was what letter when encountering them in a text – the three dots in the bended shape of چ I illustrated as the sneezing eyes and mouth in a face, with the intent that it would evoke the memory of that the letter چ pronounces /ch/ as in achoo.

Treating all of the Persian letters this way made it possible for a person literate in Swedish to read out all the sounds of the alphabet without any prior knowledge of Persian. As for a non-literate person they could recognize all the shapes of the Persian script and relate to them as images.

To help the viewer to easily discover which letters that share sound, these letters translates into the same object of image. The four /z/s are all illustrated with a zombie, the three /s/s with ointment ("salva" in Swedish), the two /t/s with a crane ("trana" in Swedish) and the two /h/s with a hare.

My Persian alphabet poster

I kept with the name of *My Persian alphabeth* and the form of a poster to display all of the letters side by side (figure 3.12 and 3.13).

The bigger format of 70 x 140 cm allows each image to have its own space, and the placement of four letters in a row follows the resemblance of the shapes of the Persian script that often goes in pair of two or four.

Since the poster invites both literate and non literate viewers to take part of it without the requirement of previous knowledge of the Persian alphabet, I find it suitable for both Persian/Swedish bilingual environments and Swedish monolingual educational environments like preschools.

Figure 3.12: Final result – My Persian alphabet poster



Figure 3.13: My Persian alphabet poster, 70 x 140 cm



My Persian alphabet box of letter cards

To the poster I added a box (12 x 12 x 7 cm) of letter cards (figure 3.14). Each card displays one letter so you can focus on one at a time.

The visual appearance of the box I wanted to be display friendly, show on features an sending an invitation to play. The lid of the box is covered in a playful pattern created by the banana image of letter ب. The name *My Persian alphabet* is accompanied with a short explanation of content: “32 letter cards with phonetic pronunciation”.

On one side of the box, there is a short copy on the concept:

Letters can be written in many different ways.

A “B” can look like this: B

And a “B” can look like this: ب

ب for Banana.

My Persian alphabet shows you the sound of all the Persian letters.

The other sides of the box is covered by the letter illustrations, hopefully evoking curiosity and appeal.

Figure 3.14: My Persian alphabet box of letter cards, front and back

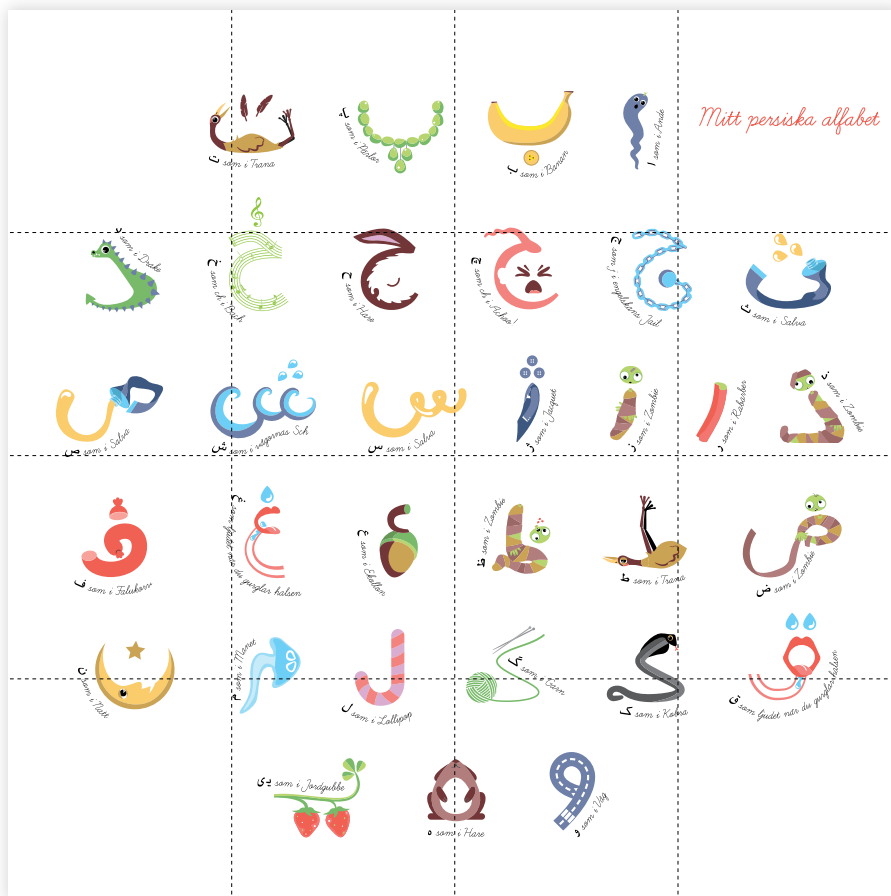


Placed at the top inside the box is a folded poster (42 x 42 cm) with all the letters and their pronunciation (figure 3.15 and 3.16), in the same manner as for the big wall poster. This will serve as your translation guide when you play with the letter cards.

Figure 3.15: Folded poster placed at the top



Figure 3.16: Poster for box of letter cards (dashed lines shows where folded)



Under the poster you find the letter cards. One side of the letter card shows the Persian letter, and if you are unable to remember how to sound it out you can flip the card and on the other side is the letter again but now as the image showing how the sounds starts in Swedish (figure 3.17 and 3.18). Depending on your skill level you can choose which side to start with.

Figure 3.17: Letter card printed on both side

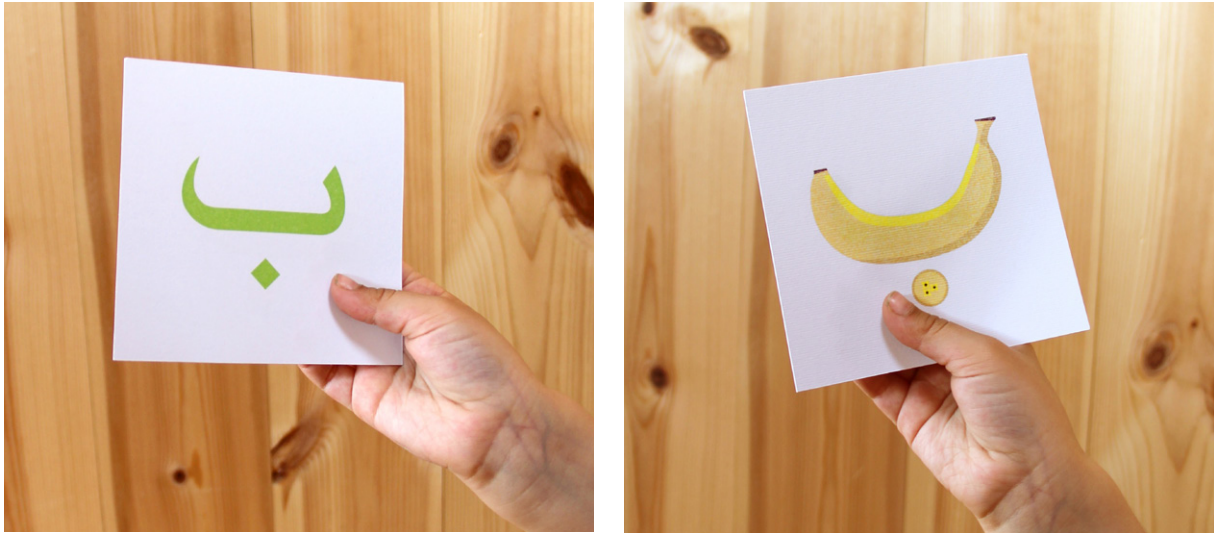


Figure 3.18: Letter cards in box



The size of the cards are 10,5 x 10,5 cm, a size that I find is both big enough to show the letters in a clear way, and small enough to be easy to handle. Since the size of the box is somewhat more convenient than the much larger poster, it is easy to find a storage place for in a home environment. You can play and talk about the cards with your child and after usage easily put it away until next time.

4 Reflection on design issues

This project has addressed mainly three key design issues:

- How to expand on the fact that children see letters as images
- How to visually show a translation of phonetic sound
- How to decrease the perceived distances between the cultural heritage of Iran and Sweden

Letters as images

Letters are a graphic mark for the smallest linguistic units of sound. I think that we, as literate adults used to the every day usages of letters, focus more on their function of representing sound than on what they really are – an image. Children on the contrary see them as pictures, even long after being able to name their different representations of sound such as /a/, /b/ and /c/.

The main design issue for my project has been how to expand on the fact that children see letters as images as a way of getting to know an alphabet. I have done this by connecting the shape of a letter to another already known shape. Hopefully through this, the child can remember and relate to the sound and shape of the letter as a first step to make the phoneme connection.

For adults trying to learn the Persian script, this might be a way of rediscovering the letters as pictures. I think it is more easy to learn letters in a playful way as an exploring child instead of sitting bent over a book trying to memorize the letters by reading them.

Visual translation of phonetic sound

In my exploration of how to work with letters as images, the final result is a merge of an experiment with the design issue of how to visually show a translation of phonetic sound. First by typography only when matching Persian and Swedish letters with the same sound. Then by adding other images when there were no equivalent in letter sound match. Step by step the project moved on to omitting traditional typography and transformed the shapes from letters to being at the same time pictures of letters and pictures of other things. One shape can be both the letter for /b/ and a banana.

Decrease perceived distances between cultural heritages

Another key design issue in the beginning of my project was to enhance the connection between Iran and Sweden by showing on similarities in cultural heritage. This was manifested in the work with the embroidered cloth and the poster Language attitudes. My working method was to through the visual appearance of the letters show on the resemblance between the cultural heritage of Iran and Sweden. My aim was to mix the look of rölakan and kelim patterns to get the viewer to question what is Swedish and what is Persian. The things that we regard as an unique heritage of a country can maybe be seen as an unique heritage of mankind instead, since they are a visual expression that have appeared autonomous of each other in different parts of the world.

Later on in the project I let go of the experiment in similarities of patterns for the sake of focusing on how to expand on the child's notion of letters as images. But the kinship between *rölakan* and *kelim* is something that I surely will continue working on; both because the patterns are beautiful and alluring, and as a way of contributing to erasing the boarder between Iran and Sweden that I feel still exists in peoples minds.

When it comes to the final result I think that the design issue of decreasing perceived distances between cultural heritages still has been addressed: In the transference of phonological skills between the Swedish and Persian lies the revelation that letters can be spelled in many different ways. There is a diversity of alphabets, but the sounds are something we all share.

5 Reflection on relevance

For personal reasons, I have previous to this project searched a lot for educational tools that could support emergent literacy in children bilingual in Persian and Swedish. I found that there were only a poor amount of material at hand, even though there must be tens of thousands Swedish children that are also learning Persian. The material that has resulted from this project is something that I myself have missed because it is not to be found on the market.

With *My Persian alphabet*, my attempt has been to de-dramatize the Persian script in terms of level of difficulty by showing the sounds of the letters in an easy comprehensible way, helping the user relate to them in terms of sound and shape.

The poster and box of letter cards can be used both at home and in a preschool environment. Learning to read in a language that is written in a different script from the one practiced in preschool explorations of print adds on to the difficulty in gaining literacy. A usage of *My Persian alphabet* in preschools with Swedish/Persian children could thus facilitate their literacy acquisition in Persian. Another evident usage would be as a tool in heritage language teaching. But I also feel that the material has relevance for preschools with monolingual Swedish children as a mean to get to know another script, or simply be employed as a conversation starter on how letters are used; how they are graphic marks for different sounds and that /a/ can be spelled in many ways. Since the transference of phonological skills isn't strictly connected to getting to know the Persian script, it would be interesting to look in to a development of expanding the project to other alphabets – *My Hebrew alphabet*, *My Cyrillic alphabet* etc.

When it comes to the phonologic translation of the letters, the translation is my own and I have used words and pictures that I personally find helpful. That said, it doesn't necessarily mean that it is the best translation solution from another person's point of view. I found it important to relate to the dots, for myself being able to recognize the different letters when encountering them in a text. Another person might need different clues to remember the different shapes.

The translation between the alphabets are based on a knowledge of Swedish and its sounds. In one case, that with the letter چ, the interpreter of *My Persian alphabet* is also required to know the English word "jail". My intent was to solve the translation using only Swedish sounds, but since the sound of letter چ is not to be found in the Swedish vocabulary I had to introduce another one. The letter چ that translates into the ch in Bach is another inbetween. Still the name of the composer is not seldom referred to in Sweden.

A person speaking only Persian would not benefit from it as a tool showing the phonologic sound of the letters. But *My Persian alphabet* is created with a Swedish market in mind (for people bilingual in Persian/Swedish or monolingual in Swedish) and since the project uses the transference of phonological skills between alphabets, it has to have another alphabet to transfer from. The usage of transference of phonological skills requires an awareness of the alphabetic principle from the user. If the user has company of a literate person, that would solve it. Otherwise my thought is that a non-literate will benefit from the product by being able to relate to the shapes of the Persian script through the images, perceive them as something familiar with favorable associations connected to it.

6 Reflection on sustainability aspects

Societal and ethical

At the start of my project my aim was to add the values that I found in the Swedish way of making visual design targeted towards kids on to the Persian way (which I thought was dull and restraining). During the progress of my work, I realized how I instead managed to show my kids which country's tradition was the preferable one instead of intriguing them with the Persian script. Without noticing it, I had fallen in to the same trap of preconceptions that I had set out to make a point against. Realizing this, I think I could more easily focus on the function I wanted to achieve when not preoccupied with preconceptions of how it ought to look like, or how it ought to be used. I also felt freer in taking inspiration from both Swedish and Persian visual traditions and mix it after my liking without attempting a blend of half and half. This is a project attempting to interlace two alphabets, but I no longer try to make claim on having achieved an equalness in use between them. I have my biases as a Swede, had I been from Iran the final result would surely had looked different.

The images used for portraying the letters are chosen out of free spirit – there are red lips, fainting animals and blood squirting. Things that I find interesting and things that I hope that children will find interesting. One of the z:s, **ز**, is in the shape of a kneeling zombie with its head falling off. The reason for making the /z/s into zombies was because it is one of the few words used in Swedish beginning with /z/, and by using the head of the zombie in various positions I could facilitate the remembrance of the positioning of dots in the different letters. In my way of picturing the letter **ز** one could see the resemblance with an execution, but this has certainly not been my intention. I would be deeply sorry if someone took offense for portraying the letters in the way that I have.

Economical, technical and ecological

The format of the poster, 70 x 140 cm, is not a standardized one. It is quite big and acquires its space, and there are no prefabricated frames for this format if the user should be tempted to preserve it as in the state of purchase. In a preschool environment the format is still functional since there often are dedicated wall spaces for educational graphics. And since the format is large it is also possible for many kids to gather round it at the same time and still be able to interact with the piece. In an home environment, it can be hung on a door or similar space. And if it is kept unframed, the children can themselves paint on it, adding there own shapes.

The format of the letter cards, 10,5 x 10,5 cm, makes it easy for the user to replace missing cards with own letters and phonetical interpretations, or to make own collections of cards for the box. From that aspect *My Persian alphabet* can be used as a framework for families or preschools as a method of working with letters. They can create their own material as a form of a play or in a workshop as a way to get to know the different letters. For the user, it could be a very economical and ecological solution, using material at hand.

7 Reflection on process

This reflection will deal with my ambivalent relationship with the design process. Dear reader, I hope you will forgive me for including a short account of my main learnings as a student. I will try not to bore you and hold it real short. I do this on purpose of pin pointing my two key reflections that has affected me most as a designer and that has had a great impact on the working process for this thesis. One regarding what is good design, and one regarding how to achieve it.

When I started out as a student at HDK I expected to learn what was good and what was bad design in terms of what looked appealing to the eye. But instead I was reminded that what is beautiful and what is ugly lies in the eyes of the beholder. Therefor the pursuit of something good looking can not be the goal for a working design solution. The conclusion I have come to is that in order to be successful in a design you have to aim for the heart and head instead of the eyes of the target group.

When it comes to the working process in how to achieve this prosperous design solution, I have struggled between two routes; a way of intuitive design (doing without reflecting) verses a conscious design process (reflecting on what you are doing). The former I felt was describing my usual way of working, the latter a way of working that I wanted to adapt.

For the master thesis, I set out to really stay true to a reflective design process to see were it may lead me.

I started out with gathering theoretical material that I could reflect upon. It amounted to quite a mass after a while. Every time after having feedback from my supervisor or from a seminar, I felt stuck. The greater the mass of feedback, the harder I got stuck. But after an appropriate time of digesting the feedback, I felt I was able to make use of it to adjust the course of my project, getting rid of “darlings” that I had been saving for too long and asking myself critical question of why I had chosen to do things in a certain way.

But still, after all that time that I tried to stay true to the design process, like following up on feed back and constantly questioning why I was doing things, I still felt really dissatisfied the weeks before the first assessment seminar. I felt like the tailor in the fairy tale – he who started out with material for making a coat and ended up with only the thumb of a mitten. I had spent way to much time on research and questioning my project from different angles, and only a small amount of time on sketching and trying out practical design solutions. I had been reflecting without a proper amount of doing.

At the first assessment seminar, my supervisor said that I had closed my project to early, and I find that to be very true. I wanted to finalize it according to my time table from the beginning of the semester, even though I had not tried out enough designs to find a solution that would live up to the criteria that I had formulated for the project. When my deadline was closing in I recessed to move on to final art instead of focusing on the result or lack of result of the design process.

As I look back at it, I think I had an idea of the design process as being a sort of mystical sphere which I had not accessed before. I thought that if I could penetrate this bubble, something grand and secret would reveal itself. I felt quite confident

in starting up this process with my project plan as a starting point. But I felt very insecure when perceiving myself somewhere in the middle of it and not knowing where to go next, or what step to take to get that revelation I was expecting existed somewhere in the heart of it.

For me, that revealing moment came on the first assessment seminar, when the external critic interpreted my material without having any previous knowledge of my project besides seeing pictures of the first poster serie. When preparing her feed back for the seminar she did not care for my design process since she knew nothing about it. She could only create an opinion on the physical result she saw in front of her. In doing so, she tried to solve the poster *Visual form* as a riddle, searching for meaning where there were none. I felt as a designer both happy that she had so deeply tried to interpret the graphic, and sorry that I had not provided the meaning she was looking for.

In my weary search for a way in to the design process, I had lost track of taking responsibility for my own design. How could I have lost my belief in my own capability in taking decisions from what I intuitively knew was working and not? At the assessment seminar I felt that I could snap out of it and evaluate my design in a rational way. I saw that the most functional poster from a pedagogic point of view – *Letter naming* – was not inviting to play. The poster *Visual form* that was inviting to play did not have anything to offer in that play. And the poster *Language attitudes* was merely a reflective piece. I felt both disappointed in myself for not being able to deliver, and also a relief that the poster serie would not reach a public.

My search for a new and unknown design process (that I at the same time was reluctant to follow, since I had hitherto not followed my supervisors advises in experimenting, cutting, scaling and breaking formats) had left me with nothing but insecurity. I had managed to accomplished the reflecting part, but not the designing. The lesson I learned from this is that I must trust my own design skills. In order to touch the heart and mind of another you have to emanate from the heart and head of your own. And in these bodily parts of the designer lies all your accumulated experiences and reflections from previous work. Including these kind of reflections that I am writing now.

I could finally take in what my supervisor had told me again and again during tutoring: you need to break the poster format to find a scale and composition that works. Why I could at last take to my heart what she was saying was because I understood then that it needed to be done for my work, not for the sake of the design process. It was my work that needed to be opened up, and that work is inseparable from a design process whether you believe to have it or not.

The attempt of the external critic to find the hidden meaning was an important catalyst for the remake of the final result. I took up the game that she had started and kept on working with my material from there.

Throughout the project I struggled between the role of being a parent to bilingual children and the role as a designer, having a hard time to separate the two. When I let go of making a statement on language attitudes I found that it was easier to work with the project only as a designer. The consequences of language attitudes was something that I personally felt so strong for that I was unable not to explicitly relate to my own family while working on it. When I instead focused on the pedagogic intentions I wanted to achieve it felt natural to work against a more general design solution.

Project plan for Master thesis
Charlotte Askari, IS

2013-02-01

How can one make young emergent readers intrigued by the Persian alphabet?

1. Background

More than three million Iranians are living abroad. In Sweden there were 2011 more than 63 000 Swedes born in Iran living in Sweden. With spouses and children that makes plenty of Swedes with connection to the Persian language. Hence there is a big target group of young children learning Persian as a minority language (that is they are learning a language not commonly spoken in their country of habitat) with little outside support. They are exposed to the Persian language mainly at home, with their extended family, and through eventual connection to the Persian community. Through their home environment some of them also interact with the Persian language through media sources such as Iranian satellite TV programs, Iranian local radio, newspapers, magazines, and the internet.

Learning a language includes both listening comprehension, oral language and reading development. But when it comes to educational tools to support reading development in Persian, there are very limited material at hand.

Bilingual children learning Persian as a minority language has different needs than native speakers of Persian language, mainly because they learn the language through different sources and in a different cultural setting. Therefore, heritage language teaching requires tools and materials different than those taught in primary schools in Iran. So supporting Swedish/Persian children with suitable instructional material for reading development is a big challenge.

This project will focus on tools that can be used to boost Swedish/Persian children's emergent literacy in Persian. I will focus on tools for the earliest stages of literacy development, naming letters and a visual recognition of basic word.

2. Objectives

Need identified:

Being a parent to simultaneous bilingual children, I have searched for learning material that can encourage my kids to learn and feel intrigued by the Persian alphabet. This has proven to be a difficult task. As for the Latin alphabet, there are loads of playful and pedagogic materials with bright colors, bold graphics and humorous visual language. For the Persian ones it is quite the opposite. It is characterized of bland design, portraying kids as being constantly well behaved sitting at their desks.

Result I am aiming for:

Since the Latin alphabet already have a head start in exposure, I would like to make some intriguing material making use of the Persian alphabet in such a way that would encourage the child to embrace it.

As for physical outcome I am thinking of graphical abc-materials. I have myself been searching for graphical letter-posters for children's room with the Persian alphabets so that is one product I would like to include. It would also be interesting to explore possible digital solutions, for example iPad. I see this product being used in a home environment, but could also be used in language education in preschools.

Target group:

My main target group is Swedish/Persian children in their preschool years. I chose this as an age span since this is an age of emergent literacy interest of children, when they are curious of letters and the focus will be primarily on reading as decoding (for example ability to name letters). But since the context were they learn Persian is a mainly Swedish speaking one, I find it important to include also young children learning "only" Swedish in the research question, since I find that the attitudes towards the Persian alphabet of their Swedish friends will be vital for the children's will to adapt it.

3. Issues

Attitudes towards the Persian language

For a child to get intrigued by the Persian alphabet, the experience and cultural issues will be very important. How is the Persian alphabet usually seen in Sweden? For the majority of the population, a text with Persian lettering is perceived as something unknown. What is our bias towards this unknown content? How will this affect young children's will to embrace and adapt the Persian/arabic alphabet? Because the attitudes towards exists both amongst the speaking and non-speaking of the Persian language, my research question "How can one make young emergent readers intrigued by the Persian alphabet?" is formulated towards young emergent children in general, since I think that the overall attitude towards the language in society has a strong impact on children's will to adapt it.

What are the linguistic characteristics of the Persian languages?

Which features need extra instruction?

How is the Persian alphabet introduced in education today?

Learnings to incorporate in my material, parts that can be developed.

How is the Latin alphabet introduced in education today?

Learnings to transfer to educating the Persian alphabet.

What kind of visual language will be engaging and relevant to the children's lives?

How to make connection between letters and the every day usage of language.

How to kick-start reading ability

It is only when the child learn to recognize all the letters of the alphabet that it can use the grapheme-phoneme conversion rules in Persian more systematically; this skill is normally obtained later on in reading education. It would be interesting to see what kind of tools one could provide to help the child read at a more basic level, for example isolating the most frequent letters from which the child can have a visual recognition of simple words.

Possibilities for further development

How to make a material for practicing decoding and naming of letters that can later be built upon to more advanced reading skills

4. Implementation

I will start out by laying out a theoretical framework, learnings from the education in Persian given to preschool children in Gothenburg and learnings from Swedish pedagogs teaching reading. After gathering and analyzing all of this, my goal is to generate multiple ideas, and try them out on children in my environment to test reactions.

5. Timetable

	<i>week</i>
Project planing	2-3
Information gathering	4-6
Analysis	6-7
Concept development	7-9, 12
Define and refine	9-12
Executing design	13-15
Prepare presentation	9,14
Execute presentation	10, 15-16
Reflection/Report	18-23
Exhibition	23

//Charlotte Askari
Demis2