

ماهی را هر وقت از آب بگیری تازه است!

It is never too late and better late than never !

A large group of Iranian immigrants, spread around the world, on a daily basis, face the great challenge of preserving their mother tongue and native culture in the host society.

It is an undeniable fact that these families, while trying to make sense of the confused cultural boundaries they experience, find themselves in the urgent need to communicate and negotiate their way in the new society. To fulfill this need, learning the dominant language becomes vital and by so doing, transmitting their knowledge of their mother tongue can easily become secondary. In societies where the term “different” is used to politely express distances and/or dislike, even older immigrants find “assimilation” a much more convenient solution than “coexistence”. In such situation the language is the first to be gone in the many tumultuous cyclones of immigration. Although the difficulties we face as immigrants are nothing but facts, preservation of our mother tongue and native culture lies between our own hands.

Children, who left Iran at a very young age and the second generation born in host societies, can be divided in many groups:

- 1) The ones who do not know any Persian. They speak in English with their parents.
- 2) Another group do know Persian however speak colloquial language and often reproduce what they have heard and not always correctly.
- 3) The Pranglish(Persian-English) speakers who mix Persian and English or Persian with the language of their host society.
- 4) A group who are exposed only to Persian, as their parents, in one hands are not familiar with the host society language and in other hand their knowledge of Persian language is intuitive. The Persian used by this group serves the daily and practical uses. I have come in contact with many from this group among my university students who speak Persian but do not know the writing system.
- 5) The ones who left Iran at an older age find themselves better equipped to face this challenge, in particular if they continue to read and write in this beautiful and rich language following a progressively challenging texts. The difficulties emerge when younger Iranians or the second generation find themselves caught between the family means of communications and those of the host society. I am using the term “means of communication” in lieu of the language as people use language only as one these means. A larger picture offers many cultural means as music, painting, literature, customs etc...

In preserving the mother tongue and the cultural heritage, a different approach is in order to address the needs of each of the above group. Taking in consideration that the language

acquisition ability of children heightens in early ages, our responsibility begins very early. Instances of four years old speaking two or more languages, although not very common, prove the possibility of learning many languages at the same time at an early age, however the mother tongue plays a major role in unifying the family and strengthening emotional stability of its members, by providing them with that essential feeling of continuity: from mother land to here , from past to present, from parents to children a same familiar tread needs to be remembered by the immigrant, young or old.

As parents and concerned immigrants what can we do?

It is essential to incorporate the systematic learning of the mother tongue in our children educational environment as early as they start socializing with their peers in the educational system of the host society: ie. from the day care phase. Providing exposure to your native tongue while volunteering at your child/ren day care center and later at kindergarten is a fun start. How many of us still find ourselves to hum the lullabies we were snag to as toddlers? Making communal effort to start after/before school language programs, creating and supporting community native language Sunday schools, making an effort to have these community schools courses recognized by the public school system of the states of residence are other efforts leading to the recognition of our heritage not only by our offerings in the new land, but also will opens the road to the offering of our mother in the public middle and high schools system. The benefits of such courses are endless, namely students feeling of belonging to a community of their own heritage, feeling the fruitfulness of their effort in learning their mother tongue as it can translate in school credits. To these apparent benefits, we should add those of unifying the families and most of all equipping the children with a strong sense of self and clear identity. Hopefully they will fly away from the nest with strong wings.

As educators, numerous are the possibilities at our reach:

Educators can help interested parents to take part in their children's systematic education of their mother tongues, by encouraging them to volunteer. However they can play a more extensive role by creating and offering new course through acquisition of available grants. May such grants are available through the department of education and National Foreign language center. For example just recently, NFLC launched Startalk program aiming at middle school and high school students language courses. For more information one may check:

http://www.nflc.org/projects/current_projects/startalk/

This summer, through the generosity of the STARTALK program, administered by The National Foreign Language Center, Language acquisition resource Center at San Diego State University is able to offer a unique language experience for middle and high school students. This free, non-residential language and culture program is open to interested and qualified students, grades 7-12. The unique features of the program are the low teacher to student ratio and the opportunity to meet nearby Persian communities for cultural enrichment. The program is designed to teach three levels of learners, and non-heritage and heritage speakers are encouraged to apply. Regular field trips will expose students to the rich cultural mosaic of the Persian communities of San Diego. Classroom activities also include dancing, music, movies, cooking, and other culturally

appropriate events. Each classroom will have a lead teacher and assistants who are experienced in teaching these age groups. Students will also have access to the state-of-the-art lab facilities.

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