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Oral History in Schools: Necessities and Solutions

Abolhasani Tarqi* and Mehdi

History of Iran Farhangiyan University of Isfahanm.

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ABSTRACT

Although the Iranian historical people have seen history as a low level hobby and entertainment, they are interested in it. Memories, stories and the history of any generation do worth hearing, and the audible histories ranging from political history to explaining the ordinary and daily life of the people are found a lot in Iranian families. On the other hand, since the education system and its resources especially in the section of Humanities and particularly history are run by the government, it has created a kind of despair from the subjects of the history courses in the middle and secondary sections. The state-running of the section of history education, unwillingness of history teachers in active teaching, the escape of the pupils from the history course and the existence of formal and rigid subjects in history courses of secondary schools are among the main facts concerning the difficulty of history education in Iran. Apart from the defects it has, Formal history has caused a gap of the generations from each other as well as the transfer of real and informal history. Thus, it is necessary to search for the solutions and methods which have brought Iranian families and their children to epicenter of history. This is the solution which can play an important role in the dialogue between the generations and providing the grounds for historical participation of the pupils, and a method which educates the close and tangible history for the pupils and provides a new image from social history, different interpretations from history and a new way for connecting them with the society.

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Introduction

In post-revolution years and with the change of elementary education system, the term-credit system and then annual-credit system was established in 3-year Elementary and one-year Pre-university courses instead of the four-year Elementary, and Technical-Professional courses.

On the other hand, the subject of Humanities was established with the combination of Social Economy and Culture and Literature majors which the schoolbook of Historiography¹ was included in its pre-university course. The aim of collecting this schoolbook and other books for pre-university course is to develop the education of professional high school courses and to provide the grounds for the continuation of education in academic level.

The book has been changed many times by the History Group of Education Ministry and each time its content and format have been added or deleted.

Despite change of content and upgrading the book by the experts and researchers of the History Group of Education Ministry and annexing subjects with new titles like "Art and History" and "History and Literature", no title of Oral History is seen in the list of the book.

Lack of important matter, method, vision and way of oral history is seen in the lesson 1 titled "Human and History". This lesson under the heading "How do we hear of the past?" introduces four categories of data resources. They are:

Narrations: consisting of stories, legends, oral memories, sayings, and especially myths.

Tangibles: Consisting of books, tools, impressions and coins.

Epistles: Consisting of books, newspapers, magazines, logs, inscriptions, documents and letters

Rational ideas: Any kind of perception which the human carries out for understanding the past or completing and correcting one's data about the past through argument or imagery.ⁱⁱ

As it is seen, the authors have paid attention to oral cases including oral memories as one of the main resources for gaining data from the past insofar as even the 11th lesson under the heading "Biographies and History" has discussed almost extensively about biography, writing biography and writing memory. Oral history has only been addressed at the end of the lesson and just in one page.

Obviously, subjects like vision and method of oral history as an effective and progressive way in historical researches, collecting historical data, clarifying the dark angles of contemporary history, finding lost worlds and opening new areas of historicism have been ignored in this schoolbook. This is while the capacity and flexibility, extending the subjects which cover it, inter-course nature, various levels which cover it and the simplicity of needed tools and materials of oral history add to the necessity of planning and education the scientific method of oral history in the schools.

The main point is that the researchers of the middle and new periods of Iranian history are seen more among the authors of historiography book, and not only there are no advocates of new methods of historicism but no researcher of contemporary history is seen. This is while oral histories form a significant part of historical productions (knowingly or unknowingly). The sources of oral history are not seen in the list of the book's sources too.

Thus, the necessity of bringing about the subject of oral history in the historiography book of the pre-university course of Humanities can be studied from various dimensions:

- ✓ Presenting and continuing oral history traditions among Iranian families.
- ✓ Dedicating a considerable part of the history course of Iranian schools to the period of Iran and world contemporary history in the elementary, middle and secondary, professional-technical and Kar-Danesh (work-knowledge) sections.
- ✓ Strong willingness of the Iranian pupils to the subjects of contemporary history especially its active section.
- ✓ Availability of the live witnesses of the events and social and political developments in Iranian societies and families.
- ✓ High potential and talent of pupils for participating in implementing simple plans of oral history.
- ✓ Creating variety in educational methods and an exit from stereotyped and repeated ways of history education in Iran.
- ✓ Promoting the quality of educating history course in Iranian schools and changing the viewpoint of Education officials toward history course and teacher.
- ✓ Providing the grounds for using oral history method in basic and empirical sciences in representing history and obtained experiences in this area.

The benefits of using the method of Oral History and its education for pupils are as follows:

- ✓ Expanding family relations.
- ✓ The ability for inter-generation dialogue.
- ✓ Increasing the skill of critical thinking.
- ✓ Sensitizing toward the surrounding environment.
- ✓ Providing a new thinking ground by using new sources.
- ✓ Becoming familiar with others' methods of thought.
- ✓ Intellectual illustration through putting various sources together.
- ✓ Boosting learning skill: facing with new data out of formal channels, training for producing new sources, learning about successful experiences thorough interviews' information, becoming familiar with educational, research resources.
- ✓ Boosting connection skill: becoming familiar with various people from different classes, establishing connection with others, becoming familiar with other folks and races.
- ✓ Verbal skill: Becoming familiar with different accents and idioms, the ability to speak to a gathering, the ability to present an article in a class individually.
- ✓ Listening skill: Listening well is more important than speaking.
- ✓ Management skill: the ability to run a project from the beginning to the end, managing the obtained data, managing other colleagues in their work.
- ✓ Fieldwork skill: the possibility of combining practical work with theoretical one while conducting an interview, learning about practical experiences in documentations.
- ✓ Writing skill: transcribing interviews, writing the report of the project, providing the written text of the final speech, providing different subjects for an exhibition or notes.

The method is not only useful for pupils but for teachers because it has the ability to present new subjects, to educate history to the pupils practically, to use new educational methods, to establish new connection way with pupils, to control them intellectually, to learn about the pupils' demands and mentalities and to promote the status of the teacher from teller to researcher.

Oral history in Historiography

In view of the above mentioned necessities and benefits, it is suggested that the subject of oral history is included in the historiography book of pre-university course according to the following forms and in a new framework:

1- A lesson titled "Oral History" is included in the book list and after the 11th lesson.

2- Oral history is brought after oral memories in the first lesson titled "Human and History" as well as in the part of the sources of obtaining information from the past. In this stage, it is necessary to present a brief definition in the text or footnote of this lesson. It's because oral history is considered as a narrated source.

3- The proposed subjects and matters of "oral History" lesson are as follows:

- ✓ Introduction: the introduction of the lesson should refer to this point that oral history is categorized in narrated cases, and presents brief definition, and way of its formation and record inside and outside Iran. Also, the difference and distinction between oral history and oral tradition should be shown in a simple way.
- ✓ Mechanisms: Interview is described as the most important mechanism in the area of oral history activity and oral historians. In this area, the primary training on the method of conducting an interview and presenting a section of an active and successful interview, transcribing and providing the report of the interview will be useful.
- ✓ Introducing main centers of oral history inside and outside Iran and a selection of produced works with the method of oral history in Iran.
- ✓ In the section of thought and search, it can be proposed that the pupil with the help and guide of the teacher resorts to perform a brief and simple plan of oral history and conducts an interview.
- ✓ Including images and plans related to the category of oral history like microphone, tape recorder, and the scene of interview and the books produced through method of oral history.

The following practices are proposed for conducting an interview and before that:

- ✓ Ask the pupils to think about a part of their past for a while, then write or record them on tape recorder. They should try to divide and sort them according to subject, job, family, political and campaign record, and place of living.
- ✓ Ask them to write a few pages about the various angles and aspects of someone who knew in the past. This practice will make them familiar with the difficulties and features of restoring the past and give a better understanding toward the position of the person whom you are supposed to do with the same thing.
- ✓ Write a few lines about the actions they or the people close to them like father and mother, and friend and colleague have done in the past. They ask their relatives to do the same about the past of these persons. Then they compare the result. Thus, they become more familiar with the closeness of oral history with real world and its difficulties.

Every pupil can conduct interviews very easily with his or her parents in special fields such as the father's job, traditional games in Iranian families, lost traditions and as a result opens a secure door on the past history. The interview will have unique features among which we can refer to are as follows:

- ✓ Interviewee and interviewer already know and trust each other.
 - ✓ Maximum taking out of the narrator's data by the interviewer.
 - ✓ Secrecy of the interviewer and thus talking candidly by the narrator and disclosing the customary secrets on other interviews.
 - ✓ The narrator's emphasis on transferring personal experiences to interviewer in order to use them in daily life.
- Collecting historical images and photos from the family and relatives can form another part of this activity which the pupil can provide very easily in line with completing collected data.

The domination of interviewer over the moral and spiritual angles of the owners of photos and images can help a lot in scrutinizing the family's past. This kind of interview by the pupil can help a lot in writing the family history and fill lost pieces of local histories.

Advantages

The method of oral history is used not only in collecting data and information about social and political history but also about the subjects related to other courses of Humanities. We should look at oral history not as a lesson inside the lessons of historiography book but as a tool for researching and recognizing all scientific subjects and lessons. Educating the methods of interviewing and collecting data would allow the pupils of Economy lesson in their city or place of residence or studying to become familiar with those who are responsible and work in different economic areas and conduct interviews and collect data (albeit small, simple and unprofessional). Such interviews provide the grounds for representing lost jobs, the culture dominated careers and jobs, the special language of professionals and industries and many unwritten cases of economic history.

In Geography lesson, the rapid process of changing the application of farm lands, turning small cities into big, industrial and immigrant-friendly population centers, climate change in a special region during the past decades, special agricultural products, the methods of plantation and irrigations, small cultures dominating the tradition and agricultural society and many other problems in the current Iranian community can be found out through oral history and interviewing the elders.

The teachers of Sociology can make a lot of uses from this scientific method. Recognizing the population composition of big cities, small cultures which are sometimes heterogeneous, local accents and idioms, delinquency factors and social raucousness, old and positive traditions and norms are possible with the means of interview and oral history method.

We should use oral history even in other branches and courses. The process of teaching these lessons, the form of laboratories, the type of laboratory equipment and many other issues can be studies in Experimental Sciences in general and sciences like Biology and Chemistry.

In the courses of Technical-Professional branch, becoming familiar with old professors and their methods of education are

of great importance. The format of workshops and their equipment, the hours of teaching and educating technical lessons, the history of launching Technical-Professional courses in Iran, all can be interesting and important issues in the history of education, industry and art of a country, city and region to which we can achieve by using oral history method and regular planning and the power and potential available in the pupils.

The result of conducting interviews and collecting historical data about a special issue in the education department or the society should turn into research article and texts and is presented in various forms and in various courses. The importance of the task is doubled when we pay much attention to research competitions and the status of research and investigation in the current system of education in Iran.

The produced articles can be participated in scientific, literary and memory writing Olympiads, thus helping the pupils promote their scientific and research vision. Moreover, the direction of the pupils toward this path is a significant advantage for teachers of history course in administrative and evaluation terms.

Evaluation

Oral history as a scientific method in collecting data and historical information in various areas and realms especially social and cultural areas has found a special status among the modern history researchers. In the Education department, by including the oral history discussion in the professional book of Historiography in the pre-university course of Humanities, we can not only create a kind of scientific variety but make maximum benefit from the pupils' potential ability and facility by teaching this method of collecting data to them. Thus, the benefits and advantages of using this scientific method can be observed clearly in all courses of Humanities and then in all elementary and Technical-Professional subjects.

Footnotes:

ⁱ - Masoud Javandian and others, *Historiography*, Pre-university course, Humanities, Code 302.1, Iranian Schoolbooks Publication Center, Education Ministry, Education Planning and Research Organization, Tehran, 1385 (2005), 11th printing.

ⁱⁱ - *Ibid*, page 4.