



## The Qur'an as a Language

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### Abstract

The Qur'an, the very Scripture of more than a billion Muslims around the globe, and the foundation stone of their faith, morality and piety, has been essentially considered by God the almighty and the Prophet as a language to be taught, not a sacred book for reading, reciting and chanting, nor a book of law and ethics.

The Prophet founded His Qur'an teaching on listening and speaking, similar to natural training of mother tongue. Nowadays, we incessantly and continuously observe all various languages as being taught and learnt through hear-say-see methods, just like what the Prophet who his guidance is named in the Qur'an as "*Uswat-on hassana*" did to His early learners, Arabs and non-Arabs, with no differentiating, a full fourteen centuries ago. The main difference or contrast is that all other methods have considered the Qur'an as a book to be read, and hence they tried to teach its reading. But from the Prophet's viewpoint, the Qur'an is a language which should be taught to everyone, next to mother tongue, parallel to it or afterwards, taking into consideration that Qur'anic language is not any human being's mother tongue, so that even for the Prophet Himself the special Arabic of the Qur'an is not a native language and needs to be taught by God the almighty.

This paper, at first, gives an overview of reasons and evidence proving that it had been so; then, synoptically describes how the Prophet taught Qur'anic language to the early Muslims (*Sahaba*); and finally, explains how his teaching of the Qur'an could be applied in Muslim societies around the world.

**Keywords:** Qur'an teaching; Prophet's life; Linguistics; Qur'anic language; Qur'anic studies.



## Introduction

The word “Qur’an” to all Muslims around the world means only the original text of their sacred book, not its translation to any other language, even its Arabic interpretation.

The language used in the Qur’an, despite its Arabic appearance, as the Noble Qur’an states clearly, is a special and exceptional language: “*Lissan-onArabiy-onMubin*” (XVII103). That is, it can interpret/clarify all other languages, whereas all other languages can’t clarify /interpret it .

The most exceptional feature of Qur’anic language is its “clarity” and “easiness” for all learners – or saying on purpose, “users” – whoever, from wherever happen to be, at any age, in any country, having any mother tongue, Arabic included. On the other hand, this depends on teaching and learning, or more precisely, the “way” and “method” of teaching.

In the purview of Qur’anic teaching, from Muslims’ viewpoint, God the almighty is the first great master/teacher/trainer and the Prophet is His first-and-last unparalleled private pupil/ student/trainee. Then the Prophet

becomes the great master of Qur’an teaching, and all Muslims, or more precisely, all human beings are His pupils in a worldwide class. But, it is regrettable to notice that nowadays Muslims have to a great extent forgotten or neglected the Prophet’s method of Qur’an teaching, in spite of the fact that his guidance is named in the Qur’an as “*Uswat-on hassana*” i.e. good example, referring to every other example as inappropriate.

In fact, Muslims can present no convincing evidence and have no reasonable excuse, why they should give up the Prophet’s guidance infracting from His way and mastership, in such an essential and exigent subject. Nevertheless, we already witness dozens of Qur’an teaching methods implemented, which are too distant from the “*Sunna*” and they will not succeed at an acceptable rate, of course.

The main difference or contrast is that all other methods have considered the Qur’an as a book to be read, and hence they tried to teach its reading. But from the Prophet’s viewpoint, the Qur’an is a language which should be



taught to everyone, next to mother tongue, parallel to it or afterwards, taking into consideration that Qur'anic language is not any human being's mother tongue, so that even for the Prophet Himself the special Arabic of the Qur'an is not a native language and needs to be taught by God the almighty.

## **I. Reasons and evidence**

**I-1. Textbook:** The Qur'an is not a rather long book; it consists of 114 chapters varying in length: the short ones are placed at the end, and the longer ones at the beginning. Hence, if Qur'an teaching was aimed at teaching a book, the exclusive way to that educational aim would have been teaching all over the whole text, from the beginning to the end, or to have a shortcut to the aim, taking samples of a great deal of *suras* and *ayas*, leaving the reminder to learners to learn it by themselves, as it had been, unfortunately, routine in Iran since about half a century.

But, in view of the fact that the Prophet's aim was training His disciples (*Sahaba*) as "Hamalat al-Qur'an" i.e. Qur'an scholars<sup>1</sup>, namely teaching Qur'anic language to them, He indicated and selected a part being one-seventh of the whole text (*Mushaf*) as "student's book" and "workbook" for Qur'anic language, altogether.

During the last years in Medina, the Prophet divided the whole text of the Qur'an, after it was fixed and nearly completed, to seven main sections and named each of them "*Hizb*" referring to groups of *suras*. The seventh and final *Hizb* of the Noble *Mushaf* consists of 65 *suras*, beginning from al-Qaf and ending with al-Nas. The Prophet has bestowed upon this very *Hizb*, despite the fact that most of its *suras* are short or nearly short ones, the title "*Mufassal*" i.e. "expanded", "stretched" and "explained" or "multilayered".

**I-2. Hear-say-see:** The Prophet founded His Qur'an teaching on listening and speaking, similar to natural training of mother tongue.

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<sup>1</sup> al-Kulayniy, 2/606, N.11; al-Saduq, 1404, 4/399, N.5855; al-Haythamiy, 1988, 7/161; al-Tabaraniy, 3/132, N.2899; al-Suyutiyy, 2/215, N.5875



Muslims should hear the revealed *suras* by the Prophet's recitation or others', over and over, trying to repeat after the reciter, as well as they could, until they are able to recite their learnt Qur'an by heart. They would have manuscripts of their own afterwards, but they necessarily needed no *Mushaf* to be able to recite the Qur'an. Even though having a personal *Mushaf* and reading the Qur'an in it has been noteworthy in the Prophet's Qur'an teaching.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, what great orientalist such as Theodor Noldeke (1836-1930), Ignatus Goldziher (1850-1921), Karl Brockelmann (1868-1956), Regis Blachere (1900-1973), in spite of their plenteous knowledge, have stated considering most various Qur'anic recitations as based on Qur'anic script, could not be completely correct.<sup>3</sup>

Nowadays, we incessantly and continuously observe all various languages as being taught and learnt through hear-say-see methods, just like what the Prophet did to His

early learners, Arabs and non-Arabs, with no differentiating, a full fourteen centuries ago.

**I-3. Abundant facilitating:** There are many marvelous and puzzling points in Prophet's life, but one may say the most puzzling and marvelous one is the Prophet's performance and behavior in the domain of Qur'an teaching. One can not find even one example for strictness, pedantry and severity in the subject under discussion, during His guiding life. On the contrary, He behaved so flexibly that occasionally caused "something" in the heart of His loyal disciples.<sup>4</sup>

The Prophet repeated His very wondrous speech each time and on each occasion emphasizing that "The Qur'an has been revealed/sent down on seven types; thus, read it as easy as you may read" (al-Buxariy, 25/235; Muslim, 1/560; al-Xueiy' 171-193; al-Fani, 42-46) clearly referring to recitation of the Qur'an as being limitless, not confined to seven or seventy types; as was indeed witnessed afterwards (al-Tabariy, 1/18-20;

<sup>2</sup> al-Muttaqiy al-Hindiy, 1/516, N.2301

<sup>3</sup> Ridwan, 2/516-550; al-hamad, 717-728; Hammuda, 182-213; Ramyar, 7, 121-154

<sup>4</sup> al-Tabariy, 1/11; al-Xueiy, 172-173



Abushama, 148-152; al-Zarkeshiy, 1/469470; Ibn al-jazariy, 1/40-44). Also, whenever He heard or listened to anyone reciting a *sura* or an *aya* of the Qur'an, He already approved them in advance before the reciter or others could hesitate or doubt about their recitation of Qur'an as it would have been questionable (al-Tabariy, 1/16; Ibn al-jazariy, 1/52; al-Zurqaniy, 1/178-183; al-Fani, 46-50).

By this sagacious and wise foresight, the Prophet resisted and confronted all ways and closed all doors to any shape of strictness and severity towards every recitation of the Qur'an. Hence, Muslims took great pleasure in Qur'an learning and reciting, so that it became their continuous occupation during day and night, through peace and war, and in every good or bad situation.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, all His disciples became teachers of Qur'an by themselves, while they did not recognize any sign or signal of difficulty or any trace of unsurpassable hardship in the program.

This very behavior of the Prophet and His unexpected attitude towards Qur'an teaching, noticeably and manifestly proves that He did not regard it as training Muslims for being merely able to read "*Kalamullah*" in the Noble *Mushaf*. It has already been narrated and we know a lot about exactingness and fastidiousness towards writing the Qur'an. There is a large and expanded tradition about the scribes of revelation (*Kuttab al-Wahy*) explaining how the Prophet was punctilious and insightful toward their important work.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, we see that all specialists and experts at linguistics and psychology definitely emphasize upon not to correct infants while they are learning their mother tongue, pointing out that any correcting might cause them disorder and disturbance in their speaking, even mentally illness.

These reasons and others make obvious and apparent from the Prophet's viewpoint that the Qur'an teaching has been teaching a language, not merely training/teaching the

<sup>5</sup> al-Tabariy, 1/10-11, 18, 22; Abushama, 88; al-Zarkeshiy, 1/302-303, 313-315; al-Zurqaniy, 2/179-180

<sup>6</sup> Ibn qutayba, 42; Abu shama, 54; al-Saleh, 108; al-Kurdiy, 103-106, 124-127



trainees/learners in order to be able to read a book (*wa yu'allimuhum al-kitaba wa al-hikmata*, LXII:2 i.e. and to teach them the Book and the Wisdom).

## II. How the Prophet taught the Qur'an

The Prophet learned the Qur'an from God the almighty (*Sanuqri'uk-a fala tansa*, LXXXVII:6 i. e. We shall make thee recite, to forget not.) through hearing and saying, by heart, clearly and distinctly (LXXV:16-19), word by word, and character by character (al-Halabiy,1/260). Then He taught early Muslims similarly, faithfully, exactly, and literally, so that everybody around Him was able to repeat the words of God's speech after the Prophet, learn it by hearing-saying several times, and recite what had learned by themselves afterwards. Besides, they were able to teach other Muslims as easy and exact as they had been learning.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, whenever a *sura* or a group of *ayas* were revealed, the former simple educational

system became activated. The newly revealed part of the Qur'an was to be recited, heard/listened and repeated over and over, until it could join the previous part of Qur'an and get combined with early *suras* and *ayas*.

In this manner, in Mecca, month by month and year by year, the account of revealed Qur'an and number of taught/learned *suras* increased, until the total number of Meccan *suras* reached 80 or so. Some of these Meccan *suras*, nevertheless, were not completed before *Hijra* and their files were open in Medina too, until they got closed. Also, it is to be noted that some of these *suras*, despite being called "Meccan", had all their *ayas* revealed in Medina indeed, except the first few *ayas* ( even only the first *aya* ) as is the case with *sura* 6, 7 and 17.<sup>8</sup>

During the last years of Medina, as mentioned above, the text of the Qur'an got shaped/formed and it is narrated that during the last years of His life the Prophet divided the sacred text to seven "*Hizb*"s. The order of this

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<sup>7</sup> al-Buxariy, 1981, 6/108; al-Tirmithiy, 4/246, N.3072, 3074; al-Imam Ahmad, 1/57, 69, 153; al-Thahabiy, 1/33; al-Majlissiy, 89/189, N.13; al-Fadliy, 13-21; Ma'rifat, 2/31-45

<sup>8</sup> Lessani, F., GIE, related articles



division was to regard three long *suras* after *Fatihah al-Kitab*, i.e. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> *suras*, as the first *hizb*/section; the next five *suras* as the second *hizb*; the next seven *suras* as the third *hizb*; the following nine *suras* as the fourth *hizb*; the next 11 *suras* as fifth *hizb*; the following 13 *suras* as the sixth *hizb*; and the 65 last *suras* as the seventh/last *hizb*.

To the light of this noticeable division of Qur'anic text accompanied by the Prophet's guidance, the early learners and first teachers of the Qur'an found out that new Muslims or infants should learn the Qur'an only by hearing and saying/repeating the seventh *hizb*, *sura* by *sura*, al-Nas to al-Qaf, of course, not vice versa.

In this manner, and by applying this simple system of teaching-learning, Muslims taught each other and at the time of Prophet's departure from this world, a large number of Muslims had totally taught the whole text of the Qur'an who were given the title of "*Qari*" or "*Muqri*" i.e. a person who is perfect and expert at teaching the Qur'an.<sup>9</sup>

### III. How we could do the same

**III-1. The main idea:** How can we accomplish now what the might do the Prophet did at His time and circumstances? The logical answer (and the shortest too) is that present Muslims, first of all should regard His "*Uswa*" and "*Sunna*" as obligatory and as a rule, unless it is impossible or inaccessible in some cases or situations. In such cases or situations, naturally, it would be alright to find the nearest and most similar to the Prophet's "*Uswa*" as an alternative.

**III-2. Unexpected occurrence:** What has occurred during 14 past centuries with regards to Qur'an teaching, truth saying, has been an odd thing. One may naturally consider it probable that many traces and pathways to the teaching of Qur'an during Prophet's time get unreachable and disappeared, but when the present author embarked on researching this matter, several years ago, at a university in Iran, before long he and his assistants found out that all

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<sup>9</sup> al-Thahabiy, 1/33; al-Fadliy, 13-22.



the Prophet had said, did and approved were saved in related sources and books and there was no noticeable difficulty in retrieving and recapturing the whole method of the Prophet in Qur'an teaching.

**III-3. The applied method for the present time:** Obviously, there is no space in this paper to explain the above mentioned method of Qur'an teaching. Meanwhile, it would be practical to have a brief report of applied and update method of Qur'an teaching exactly according to the Prophet's guidance.

As was already mentioned, we hold the textbook for teaching/hearing of the Qur'an, indicated and defined by the Prophet. Now, it will be sufficient to add some necessary details, forgoing more explanatory exposition.

We have already five training stages in our Qur'an teaching or Qur'anic language course. The first stage consists of 22 short - even shortest- *suras* beginning with al-Nas and ending with al-Duha; the second stage 15 *suras*: from al-Layl to al-Naba'; the third

stage 11 *suras*: from al-Mursalat to al-Mulk; the fourth stage nine *suras*: from al-Tahrim to al-Mujadila; and the fifth/last stage consists of the eight remaining, relatively long *suras*: al-Hadid to al-Qaf.

After passing this five stages, the Qur'an learner will get trained at the following points:

**1<sup>st</sup> stage: listening** to the teacher's recitation and **reading** *Suras* and *Ayas* after the teacher until aptitude to recite the learnt *suras* and *Ayas* individually, and practicing making transcription of Qur'an text;

**2<sup>nd</sup> stage:** Besides those trainings of first stage continued, learning and practicing *Tasrif*/substitution, and learning the different way of learning *suras* of two units (*Ruku's*) or more (each unit is named *Ruku'*);

**3<sup>rd</sup> stage:** Besides those trainings of previous two stages continued, learning how to find out the main subject of learnt *suras*, learning and practicing to scribe by *Kufi* script; the "Qur'anic script" according to the Prophet's approach;





**4<sup>th</sup> stage:** Continuing trainings of three stages before, practicing to **write dictations** of Qur'an text, only well learnt *suras*, of course and expand the *Tasrif* of *suras*, that is to substitute various parts of one *sura* by appropriate parts of other *suras*, in the other words, to practice **speaking Qur'anic language**;

**5<sup>th</sup> stage:** going on all trainings of four previous stages, expanding *Tasrif*/substitution of *ayas* and words, in order to Learn and practice **written and oral composition** in Qur'anic language.

Thus we already have **all four language skills** in Qur'an teaching according to the Prophet's *Sunna* and *Uswa*, consisting of arranged trainings in order to enable trainees at **listening, speaking, reading and writing** in Qur'anic language.

In the same way, there is a nice concordance between the schematically

explained path of teaching-learning and Qur'anic expressions exactly placed in fitting suitable places in *suras*. At the beginning, there are **four** *suras* beginning with very opening "**Qul**" (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> from the end of Scripture). Near the end of the first stage, the trainer and trainee pass the first *ayas* of *sura* al-Alaq (the 19<sup>th</sup> *sura* from the end of Scripture) saying: "**Iqra**" ... "**Iqra**". At the beginning of the *sura* before last *sura* of the third stage, they have an *aya* to pay much tribute to **writing and calligraphy**, the first *aya* of *sura* al-Qalam (the 47<sup>th</sup> *sura* from the end). Finally, we have another *aya* to say: "*Allamahu al-bayan*" i.e. God taught **expression and composition** to human beings (al-Rahman, 4<sup>th</sup> the *sura* N.60 from the end). The *aya* is placed right in the middle of the fifth/last stage of Qur'anic language course.



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