

Teaching to Transform – Effective Tafsir Strategies

Fawzia Belal

ISNA Educational Forum 2017

**Abstract**

The Qur'an is a timeless book. It is just as relevant to us today as it was to the first generation of Muslims at the time of its revelation. The most amazing part of this book is that the rules in the Quran are less than 10% of the Book itself. The remaining 90% is building character, community, and emphasizing the importance of reaching our potential as human beings.

As Islamic Studies teachers we often struggle to come up with content and curriculum for the effective Tarbiyah of our young minds when in reality we have the entire plan laid out for us in this miraculous book. We simply have to learn how to decode the messages and present them using effective teaching tools and strategies. For example, the idea of using diagrams or comparison chart templates are not common in a Tafsir classroom. Building connections, presenting it as a dialogue between the Creator and Creation is not witnessed much in school settings. Students are expected to memorize and regurgitate long old English translations of the Quran which at the end of the day don't make much sense to them.

Translations fail to answer questions like

- a. Why are different names such as الطامة ، الحاقة ، الفارعة given to the same day? What is the significance of the different word usages?
- b. Why is the story of Musa alaihi salam and Firawn placed in the middle of Surah Naziat that begins with the talk of angels which remove souls?
- c. Why does Allah swt refer to Rasul sas as صَاحِبِكُمْ and not رَسُولُكُمْ in Surah Takweer?

Such questions and even more complex ones are beginning to cast a doubt in the minds of our young generation. We have to step up and make a shift from our traditional teaching approaches.

This paper aims to provide teachers with a framework that they can use in their own classrooms to effectively design their own lesson plans.

### Steps to Effective Tafsir in a Islamic Studies Classroom

#### Step One: Explain Quran as a cohesive text

Example: Two passages from Surah Naba that apparently seem unrelated but in reality are part of the same conversation.

عَمَّ يَتَسَاءَلُونَ (١) عَنِ النَّبِيِّ الْعَظِيمِ (٢) الَّذِي هُمْ فِيهِ مُخْتَلِفُونَ (٣) كَلَّا سَيَعْلَمُونَ (٤) ثُمَّ كَلَّا سَيَعْلَمُونَ (٥)

أَلَمْ نَجْعَلِ الْأَرْضَ مِهْدًا (٦) وَالْجِبَالَ أَوْتَادًا (٧) وَخَلَقْنَاكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا (٨) وَجَعَلْنَا نَوْمَكُمْ سُباتًا (٩) وَجَعَلْنَا اللَّيْلَ لِبَاسًا (١٠) وَجَعَلْنَا النَّهَارَ مَعَاشًا (١١) وَبَنَيْنَا فَوْقَكُمْ سَبْعًا شِدَادًا (١٢) وَجَعَلْنَا سِرَاجًا وَهَاجًا (١٣) وَأَنْزَلْنَا مِنَ الْمُعْصِرَاتِ مَاءً ثَبَّاجًا (١٤) لِنُخْرِجَ بِهِ حَبًّا وَنَبَاتًا (١٥) وَجَنَّاتٍ أَلْفَافًا (١٦)

#### **Ayats 1 -5**

Surah Naba opens with Allah swt commenting on a discussion that takes place between a group of people who questioned the “Great News”. Without providing any more detail other than describing it as “Great” and “as a disputed matter” an implicit threat is added as a response in ayats 4 and 5.

**Ayats 6 – 16** take us on a quick round of the universe before picking up the discussion on the “Great News” in ayat 17. What apparently seems as two different sets of conversations is in reality one continuous dialogue. As the disbelievers questions and doubts resurrection in ayats 1-5, a multitude of scenes and phenomena are presented to help them realize the infinite ability of Allah swt; His ability to create and recreate.

**Step 2: Explain Ayats in its textual and historical context**

Example :

What is the backdrop against which these ayats were revealed ?

عَمَّ يَتَسَاءَلُونَ (١)

*About what are they asking one another ?*

Who are the “they” ?

عَنِ النَّبِئِ الْعَظِيمِ (٢)

*About the “Great News”*

What does the “Great News” refer to?

الَّذِي هُمْ فِيهِ مُخْتَلِفُونَ (٣)

*Regarding which they themselves are in disagreement*

How did they disagree?

كَلَّا سَيَعْلَمُونَ (٤)

*Absolute not! They will soon find out*

What will they find out ?

This will also allow to simplify the message for the students to a level that is more than just a word to word translation.

**Step 3: Explain the significance of different words for the same idea.**

Example: الطَّائِفَةُ & الصَّاحَّةُ both refer to the Day of Judgement

Surah Naziat : فَأَذَا جَاءَتِ الطَّائِفَةُ

**Surah Abasa:** فَإِذَا جَاءَتِ الصَّاحَّةُ

الطَّامَّةُ

Surah Naziat mentions the story of Musa as and Firawn. It also hints at the miserable end of Firawn in this Duniya (drowning in water that surrounded him from all sides) as well as in the Akhirah (burning in the fire that will surround him from all sides). In accordance with the context, الطَّامَّةُ is used to describe day of judgement which is a kind of calamity so overwhelming from every side that there is no way to escape it.

الصَّاحَّةُ

Surah Abasa mentions the group of people who considered themselves above the message and turned a deaf ear to it instead (فَمَا مِنْ اسْتَعْيَى)

In accordance with the context الصَّاحَّةُ is used to describe the day of judgement which means the deafening noise. It alludes to the fact that a disbeliever can choose to not to listen to the message now but on the day he will not be able to escape it.

#### **Step 4: Explain the placement of a Surah which is different from the order of revelation**

##### **Example :**

Connection between the beginning and the ending of two consecutive surahs

Surah Naba ends with the warning of the fast approaching punishment referring to death

إِنَّا أَنْذَرْنَاكُمْ عَذَابًا قَرِيبًا

and Surah Naziat begins with the description of how the soul is removed from a disbelievers

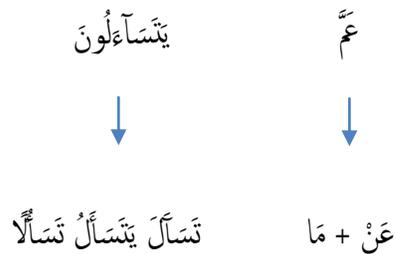
وَالنَّارِعَاتِ غَرْقًا

**Step 5: Usage of tables and charts to communicate the message more effectively**

Surah Naba		
Type of people	الطَّٰغِيْنَ	الْمُتَّقِيْنَ
Consequence/Reward	جَزَاءٌ وَّفَاقًا  an appropriate  compensation	جَزَاءٌ مِنْ رَبِّكَ عَطَاءًا حِسَابًا  a reward from your lord, an  ample gift

**Step 6: Finally but definitely not the least, a grammatical analysis of the ayat.**

Example:



### Conclusion

This model of instruction has been tried and tested on middle school and high school students. The results have been amazing. It's about time that Islamic Schools make the shift from focusing only on memorization and teaching only translation of Quranic Ayats. The times we are living in require a deeper engagement with Quran and call for a better understanding of its message. We have to facilitate it for our schools; it is not an option any more. With proper training of teachers and support from school management the above format can definitely be implemented in schools across the U.S.

Teaching To Transform – Effective Tafsir Strategies

This framework has been in the works for the past three years at our school based on student needs and responses. Alhamdulillah the results are very encouraging. Students walk away with great satisfaction when they experience a connection with the Book of Allah. Teachers walk away with a greater satisfaction when they experience the impact they have been able to create in their classrooms.

### Resources

**1. Quran as a cohesive text**

*Asrarut Tarteeb by Imam Suyuti (Arabic)*

*Ibn Aashur's Tahreer wa Tanweer (Arabic)*

**2. Ayats in its textual and historical context**

*Tafsir Ibn Katheer (English, Arabic),*

*Maariful Quran (English)*

*Ml Abdullah Abdus Saleem(Urdu)*

*Fi Zilalil Quran, Sayyid Qutub Shahid(English)*

**3. Understanding Word Usages:**

*Tafsir Muyassar by Sheikh Aaed al Qarni (Arabic)*

*Jalalyn (Arabic)*

**4. The placement of a Surah which is different from the order of revelation:**

*Ibn Aashur's Tahreer wa Tanweer (Arabic)*

*Fakhruddin Razi's Tafseer ul Kabeer (Arabic)*

**5. Grammatical Analysis: Irabul Quran (Arabic)**

