

8-31-2014

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“Insha’Allah I’ll do my homework”: adapting to Arab undergraduates at an English-medium university in Dubai

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Abstract

The United Arab Emirates and Dubai in particular have in recent years attracted an increased number of Western teachers for all educational levels, especially universities. As part of the orientation for a Western teacher before entering a classroom, the main differences between Western and Middle East culture are often highlighted without an effort to explain how these differences are manifested in students’ behavior in courses, or to suggest how the teacher could address them. This paper aims at helping current and future faculty in their professional practice by considering Emirati Arab cultural characteristics as well as strategies adopted by the author to cope with them. Such strategies have been successful, as her students’ evaluations and academic performance distinctions during the last two years have continuously shown.

Introduction

This paper is not about differences, but about similarities; or, better said, about little things that can help a Western university professor succeed in teaching Emirati undergraduate students. When I first arrived to teach at university in Dubai, I was given a faculty guide that frightened me more than oriented me, as it focused the main differences between West and Middle East, and in particular on cultural pitfalls. Some things were expected, such as focus on religion, discussion taboos, or difficulties in English as a second language; and some less expected, such as that some female students were extremely offended by the fact that they were able to see the knees of a female teacher. But none of these hints that were supposed to guide my teaching practice were actually of any help. Since the first semester I felt more comfortable in class than I had ever felt before in any of my European classrooms either as a teacher or as a student (note that I lived, studied and taught in 3 different European countries before coming to Dubai) – not to mention the jokes, the laughs, the moments of emotional exchange, or the moments of reflective learning that my students were able to make so explicitly evident, mixed with gratefulness and high motivation. This paper is about how all this was achieved in an effort to integrate a Western teacher’s expectations with those of Middle Eastern students.

Context

Dubai has 53 higher education institutions, among which 26 are international branch campuses and only 3 are federal Universities (Government of Dubai, Knowledge and Human Development Authority, 2014). As an extension of English as a Lingua Franca in the UAE’s everyday life, English has also become the second main language of teaching, starting from primary to higher education (Randall & Samimi, 2010). This has led to an increased hiring of Western teachers at all levels of education. This paper presents an effort to propose practice-based guidelines for teaching Arabic students in their region, after 2 years of successful teaching at one of the three federal Universities in Dubai. All described insights in this reflection paper are based on my own observation of classroom lessons and student performance in

assignments during two years (four academic semesters) of teaching Business Communications classes to Emirati undergraduates of both genders.

The paper is structured as follows. The first part explains some main challenges for a Western teacher working with Emirati students, relating this to students' culture and traditions; the second part describes ways of adapting to each of these challenges from a Western professor's point of view: the two parts are complementary. Finally, the students' perceptions of the author's teaching strategies are presented, as expressed through student comments in the university's Student Evaluation of the Learning Environment (SELE) surveys.

Some starting points about Emirati culture

Spirituality

Spirituality as a cultural dimension refers to the tendency of people from a specific region to follow their traditions, especially the ones implied by religion. Compared to other Arab countries, social attitudes are more conservative in the UAE (Lambert, 2008), possibly due to the need of the local minority to show a strong identity resistance to the continuous westernized acculturation, especially in Dubai (Al-Khoury, 2010; Hills & Atkins, 2013). Being spiritual (in this sense) in their everyday life includes not only following the practices of their religion such as praying at specific times of the day or fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, as well as using national attire (*abaya* for women, *kandoora* for men) to preserve modesty of dress; spirituality and the strong belief that everything is in the hands of God influence also the ways people talk, behave, work and study. For example, finishing homework in time is seen as not something determined entirely by one's own will, but something that *insha'Allah* (God willing) will be done. This strong belief in God's will is not a sign of passivity but rather a sign of deep respect for the divine, and subsequently for all humans that are within His divine power.

Collectivism

Arab culture is a highly collectivist culture, scoring very low on the Individualism cultural dimension in Hofstede's studies (Hofstede et al., 2010). This means that people perceive themselves as members of a group, more than as individuals who care mainly for themselves. As a result of this perspective, Emiratis in general are shown to be very caring regarding their extended families, friends, and people of trust. In the university context, this is manifested for example by insightful peer discussions in small groups or by efforts to make the teacher feel like part of a broader family.

Flexibility

Emiratis, like other Eastern cultures, view time holistically (Nisbett, 2003). This also implies that they are polychronic (Hall, 1959), meaning that they prefer to engage in a number of tasks at the same time. Having a class is not exclusive of other duties like praying or talking on the phone with family members. Sometimes when these duties oblige people to be elsewhere, their priorities are going to be decided in terms of values. When Emirati students ask for permission to leave class, this is often due to a strong commitment to family: events such as wedding arrangements, funerals, or health and family problems are considered to have a greater importance than attending the class. The same occurs regarding studying for an exam: excuses such as "I didn't study because I had family issues" are very common. A significant element in these excuses is the way Emirati students perceive tasks as not being restricted to time but rather influenced by other circumstances that happen in parallel.

High context

Arab culture in general is a 'high context' culture, in which the meaning of the communicated message depends on the basis of how it is delivered (Hall, 1977). People from high context cultures tend to value more nonverbal messages such as tone, gestures, and facial expressions, rather than verbal communication (Hall, 1977). At the same time, they tend to rely more on interpersonal relations and to take common cultural ground into consideration (Guffey, 2006). This dimension becomes evident in an Emirati classroom, as students very often feel the need to comment to each other in their own language, despite the institutional policy of using English during class. This is partly due to collectivism, as students try to understand the contents of the class through asking their classmates; but it is mainly due to their need to express themselves in their own 'code'. The need to speak in a language, both verbal and non-verbal, that relates to a common cultural background is more common in societies that have a high context culture than in the low-context ones (Hall, 1977; Guffey, 2006). This is especially true in the English-speaking Emirati classroom for which the Arabic cultural context is most of the times shared only among the students themselves.

Learning from models (power distance)

Most current Emirati undergraduates went to government schools, which are known for their strict teacher-centered curriculum (Richardson, 2004). When they come to University, they are not ready to think critically and independently, as they are used to learning through memorization. This is a common phenomenon in various cultural contexts; however, for the Emirati students, the difficulty to learn independently is intensified due to their society's high Power Distance (Hofstede et al., 2010). This means that Emiratis have a strong sense of hierarchy and conviction to follow people in high positions, including teachers. Therefore, the transmission to another type of learning, such as inquiry or project-based, is possible, as long as they have a concrete example to follow. Any type of guidance from part of the instructor is appreciated, while giving the students total freedom to produce a learning outcome might lead to confusion rather than creativity.

Holistic thinking

Similarly to other Eastern cultures (Nisbett, 2003), Emiratis tend to think holistically not only regarding time but also the curriculum-based content treated in class. More precisely, Norenzayan et al. (2002) found that Westerners were more likely to use formal logic structures, and they tended to be more analytical and linear in their reasoning; on the other hand, Eastern Asians tended to use more intuitive and experience-based reasoning. This is seen also in the Emirati University classroom, as students struggle to base their conclusions and recommendation on the findings of a research, even when this research is conducted by them. In one of the classes I teach, students have to produce 3-4 research reports on various topics related to language in the workplace. Although they understand the structure of the report, and they can work separately on every part, their biggest challenge is to make the logical connections between one part and the other, as for example between research findings and recommendations. This is mostly related to their tendency to "think big", following their political leaders' examples, and to be inspirational and intuitive rather than analytical. As a result, Emirati students tend to jump to conclusions and suggestions without making any explicit relations to the research rationale of their report.

How to adapt

'God willing'

The "insha'Allah" attitude adopted by the students should not by any means be seen as a way to avoid responsibility, but as an expression of deep spirituality and belief in the provisionality of human plans. It is not matter of chance that this is the first expression that most non-Muslim expatriates adopt once they spend some time in the UAE. I have caught myself many times adding "insha'Allah" in the end of a sentence, usually in class, when presenting for example the goals of the next class or the contents of an exam. Having an intensive workload as university instructors, an attitude of not being able to control everything due to a superior power or circumstances helps us to relax and prevent burn-out. An example of a more relaxed attitude includes not being stressed about marking: every time I am asked when I will put the grades for an assignment on Blackboard, I always reply with "insha'Allah" before the exact date, agreeing that we are never sure about the success of our plans, not even when we are teachers!

Group work and peer assessment

Due to their collectivist values, Emirati students are very good at conducting efficient group work, as they are very familiar with close collaboration and shared achievements, perhaps also due to their recent Bedouin past (Feghali, 1997). On the other hand, being also a high Power Distance society, internal hierarchies and leaderships are expected to emerge. It is interesting to note, though, that emerging leaders do not use their power to impose their will on others; they rather assume even more responsibilities and do a greater part of the work for the final outcome to be good. In exceptional cases, there are institutional Peer Assistance Leaders (PAL's - students who volunteer to coach other students) who are eager to teach the others to do their work right instead of doing the work on behalf of them. In these cases the group work result is by far better. Asking all students to peer-assess their group members at the end of a project is a good way of finding out who worked more than others. In order to get more fair results, I first ask the students to assess themselves in three or four dimensions on a scale of 10, and then to pass their self-grading to their group members, who decide whether the individual assessment corresponds to the actual group work process or not. To my surprise, self-grading is sometimes very low, as individuals try not to claim credit for the efforts of others.

Adapt to their needs

Being flexible is an advantage for a teacher in an Emirati education context. As discussed previously, Emirati students tend to be very close to their families, and this can impact on their performance and class attendance; also, a great number of male students in my institution work in the morning and study in the afternoon, and in addition, they have a family to take care of; in other cases, married female students become pregnant during their period of study. A great challenge for the teacher is to adapt to the students' needs without lowering the standards of academic excellence and without lacking respect for other students who manage well with the deadlines. Evaluating each time which situation merits special attention is a tough task and requires a high level of emotional intelligence. Being able to feel empathy for others and put oneself in their shoes is an appreciated characteristic in the Emirati society, especially when viewed as part of a leader's behavior (see, for example, Yousef (2000) for a study on preferred managerial styles in the UAE). But if teaching 'leadership' does not involve any emotional intelligence, then what aspect of leadership needs it more?

Allow and create codes

Being in a cultural context where internal codes and common background play an important role, it is of valuable help to try to share these codes or create some new shared values/practices between yourself and the students. Language plays a major role for that: if you are not an Arabic speaker, try to at least learn some words or phrases in Arabic. Saying these phrases at the right moments in class creates a climate of trust and equality shared with the students. Apart from sharing the students' native language, there are also other communication aspects that help create a 'classroom culture': watch the clock and give a look or smile full of meaning every time a student comes late, stare and slow down the pace of the voice each time a student does not pay attention, tell jokes or personal stories when you want to attract their attention. Speaking about the class content is not the only thing that should happen in a class; another important aim is to increase students' motivation to learn.

Provide a structure

Scaffolding is the basis of any successful teaching-learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). The metaphor of scaffolding was born in the child development research field, to highlight the contribution of parental support (gradually removed) for language acquisition (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). In higher education, scaffolding should be seen as both a principle in developing curriculum structures and programs, and as a method of articulating classroom interaction and activities in ways that enable learners to extend their existing levels of understanding (Hammond & Gibbons, 2001, reproduced in Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2005). In the second sense, University teachers should try first to understand that the existing level of their student is relative to a specific learning task, and second, to design activities that can help students build on their knowledge and go a step further in their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). Providing the correct structures is of particular importance for Emirati students as they are used to following guidelines given by their instructors (Richardson, 2004). The structures given in a university context should not limit students' thinking, but should aim at expanding their understanding and creativity. To do that, students should be helped to understand the rationale of an activity (why they are doing what they are doing), the quality standards of their outcome (how they are going to be assessed), and how to achieve the best outcome possible. The last is related to teaching students how to learn by arguing (Kuhn, 1992), meaning that every time they make a decision to solve a task, this decision should be based on reasoned claims. Differentiating between describing what they are doing and justifying why they are doing so is an example of making the reasoning process explicit, and subsequently manageable.

'See the forest' with them

The tendency of Eastern students, Middle Eastern included, to see the whole rather than the parts, as mentioned earlier, is not necessarily a fault or an obstacle in their reasoning. Intuition and practice-based knowledge are important elements in any decision-making process. Each time my students start thinking 'big' I do not stop them; I challenge them. It is not bad to jump to conclusions when these also happen to be the most accurate ones; but how do you know that this is the case? Asking students this question and helping them to find the answer, rather than leaving the answer to 'speak' for them, is another useful technique. Emirati students are very visionary and have a lot of good and sometimes innovative ideas; however, they tend to underestimate research and its value to give validity to these ideas. Especially in theoretical subjects related to social sciences, they tend to be even more skeptical regarding the point of doing research and how to do it correctly. Such behavior might be attributed to the spiritual and tribalistic past of the Emirati society. I usually spend some hours in class trying to defend the value of research itself, bringing tangible examples from the physical, engineering and

medical sciences. I am currently in the process of investigating ways to persuade my students of the value of social science research and of the importance of accuracy of its outcomes.

The students' perspective

Following North American accreditation standards, at the end of each semester the performance of every instructor at my institution is assessed by her students, as part of a survey called Student Evaluation of the Learning Environment (SELE). The SELE is a quite comprehensive tool consisting of 11 questions distributed over five factors, namely *Enthusiasm, Organization, Group interaction, Individual rapport, and Overall rating* for the instructor, with a response from 1-5 for each question.

Thus far I have received students' evaluations for four semesters, which have averaged 4.8/5 for both the female and male classes (249 students in total). These evaluations are very satisfying if one considers that this was my first teaching experience as a full-time faculty, and the first time I have taught in a Middle Eastern context. Apart from the numeric assessment, some students add comments. Table 1 relates Emirati cultural characteristics mentioned above with strategies to adapt to them and students' feelings towards these strategies as expressed in some of their comments.

Apart from the students' evaluation, the Dean's assessment of my academic performance was also very positive: in his review of the academic year 2012-2013 my evaluation "exceeded expectations", whereas I was also granted with an award for exemplary merit for the same evaluation period. The same positive impression was also formed by the four colleagues (senior faculty members) who performed structured observations for my classes each semester. Overall, my teaching was assessed as excellent by both my students and supervisors. For my part, what I consider a success is that I adapted my teaching style and methods to the Emirati cultural challenges in a smooth and enjoyable way, and in a very short time.

Table 1: Relation between Emirati cultural characteristics, teaching strategies adopted and comments in student evaluations.

Cultural element	Teacher's strategies	Students' comments
Spirituality	'God willing'	She has huge respect for culture as she tries to understand our culture and she replies the "Salaam" which is rare for our teachers
Collectivism	Group work and peer assessment	The professor is interactive with the class and always finds new ways and activities
Flexibility	Adapt to their needs	Excellent teaching styles Nice class atmosphere You feel like you can attend, learn, and enjoy all at the same time
High context	Allow and create codes	She listens to students' discussions and encourages them She makes you shy when you come late or when you send your homework in the last minute
Learning through examples	Provide a structure	The professor always supports the students in their classwork and provides

		advice to them
Holistic thinking	See the forest with them	The most interesting in her course is that she gave us the opportunity to answer questions feeling confidence

Conclusions

The goal of this experience-driven reflection paper was to offer some insight regarding Emirati culture and how it is expressed in a University classroom, as well as the Western teacher's adaptation process towards it. The starting point was that this adaptation process should not be based on assumed or surface differences but on repeated cultural patterns that can be easily managed by corresponding acceptance behavior. The result has been very positive, as students' evaluations show. A further aim of this article is to assist future new faculty in their classroom practice, not only in an Emirati context but also in other cross-cultural contexts. More reflections towards the direction of cultural adaptation in the teaching-learning process between West and Middle East are necessary to be able to identify some effective pedagogical approaches and help their appropriation by faculty in similar English-speaking Universities in the region.

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