



# *The ORTESOL Journal*

**Volume 24, 2006**

## **Features**

**The Globalization of English: A Personal Reflection from Costa Rica**

**Understanding Arab Students**

**Creating a Multi-Cultural, Student-Centered Classroom**

**Language Problems Facing Omani Learners of English**

**No Culture Left Behind: Reaching the Purepecha Indigenous People**

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**Voice E-mail**

**Lights, camera, pronunciation!**

**Using learner-generated materials to personalize learning**

**Reading with the Left Brain or the Right?**

**Not Your Usual Final Project**

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Oregon Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

# The ORTESOL Journal

**Volume 24, 2006**

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## About ORTESOL

Oregon Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ORTESOL) is a not-for-profit organization whose purposes are to raise the level of professional instruction in TESOL by providing opportunities for discussing, studying, and sharing information about TESOL and bilingual education, and to cooperate with other groups having similar concerns. Benefits of membership include *The ORTESOL Journal*, access to the member area of the ORTESOL website and *The ORTESOL Newsletter*, special member rates for ORTESOL conferences, and a variety of other services and opportunities for professional development.

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# In This Issue

*Bill Walker & Deborah Healey*

*ORTESOL Journal Editors*

Are we culturally arrogant? The feature articles of this issue of the *ORTESOL Journal* focus on culture. The authors ask you to reflect on the role that culture plays in your classroom practices, your curricula, and your materials.

In “The Globalization of English: A Personal Reflection from Costa Rica,” Winograd views English as a sort of Juggernaut that purports to economically benefit developing nations, but, in fact, carries an imperialistic Western bias. Can (should?) English be taught as a world language, devoid of cultural (Western) bias? Winograd proposes that well-intentioned language teachers “who are sensitive to the risks and dangers of cultural imperialism” can and should teach English in such a way that it is “embedded in local cultures and goals and should be available to everyone, at every level of society, not just the elite.”

Picking up on this theme, Lee Ann McNeerney and Hiromi Beppu, in “Creating a Multi-Cultural, Student-Centered Classroom,” point out that in the U. S., there is a high rate of attrition among high school ESL learners due to a feeling of being shunted aside in the classroom. Their own cultures and ways of learning are ignored while teachers from the “dominant group” impose their cultural understandings upon them. The authors enumerate ways in which “teachers can provide students with opportunities to share and express their culture in learning activities, better understand cultural differences and their own biases, adapt lessons using students’ own prior learning experiences, involve parents, and use non-traditional assessment tools to create a successful multi-cultural, student-centered classroom.”

Susan Matson and Mark Algren give us some advice on how to be culturally sensitive to Saudi

students, whose numbers have increased greatly in recent years. They extracted pertinent passages from Margaret Nydell’s book, *Understanding Arabs*, and commented on how the cultural inclinations of Arab students can be interpreted and dealt with in classroom situations.

Dr. Ali Al-Issa of Sultan Qaboos University speaks to us from the perspective of a non-native instructor who has studied the problems facing Omani learners of English. He points out that EFL in Oman is still in the grips of old-school thoughts on imparting knowledge *about* the English language to students while depriving them of practice in learning communicative language skills.

One more feature article, “No Culture Left Behind,” is summarized in this issue. Barbara Swanson and her colleagues traveled to Mexico, partially sponsored by ORTESOL’s Nattinger Grant, to investigate the culture of the indigenous Purepecha people. The full version is available in electronic form to ORTESOL members on our web site: <http://www.ortesol.org>.

In addition to these feature articles, this issue contains five Teaching Notes from seasoned experts. John Sparks throws away clunky old cassette tapes in favor of voice e-mail and gains quite a bit of convenience and efficiency along the way. Char Heitman shows us how to help students become independent learners of oral skills. Tom Delaney gives some pointers on how to go about doing some paperless teaching. Marna Broekhoff has some “right brain” suggestions for building student interest in the writing classroom. Finally, Lora Yasen finds an alternative way to assess her upper level integrated skills students by having them produce end-of-semester projects using Publisher and PowerPoint.

# The Globalization of English: A Personal Reflection from Costa Rica

*Ken Winograd*  
*Oregon State University*

In many developing countries, English is a metaphor for hope. It is the “strongest linguistic currency ...an equivalent of the American dollar, as something that needs to be attained in order to participate ...in a global market, [and it] has transformed the study of English from an instructional activity, a tool for learning, into an object of consumption” (Nino-Murcia, 2003: 122).

I just finished a year in Costa Rica, on sabbatical from my position as an education professor at Oregon State University. Although not a specialist in language teaching, I did some teaching of English in the shantytowns in and around San Jose, the capital city. In this essay, I do not describe my direct experience of teaching English. Instead, I share some of the tensions I felt as a teacher of English. Admittedly, my perspective is a bit muddled, as it should be considering my ambivalence about the globalization of English and its teaching, the focus of this article. I begin with the story of an impromptu meeting on a bus with a young Costa Rican man in pursuit of language.

I had just had an exhausting day in San Jose. Hot sun, wrong busses, missed turns, and conversations with *Ticos* who talked too fast. It is *hora piku* (rush hour) so the bus back to Heredia is crowded, but somehow I manage to get a seat. This seat is more like a sardine can, since I have to go into some perverse yoga move in order to fit. A twenty-minute ride is now sixty.

Eventually, of course, someone sits next to me, a strange event indeed when total strangers squeeze against each other, touching in an embrace but without eye contact or *amistad*. But this time, my squeeze partner looks at me and says, “Are you an American?” *Maldito!* I was praying for some quiet

so I could listen to my Spanish tape and zone out. Sweaty, hot and smelling quite foul, I begin visualizing the beach at Cahuita. But not for long.

“Why, yes,” I admitted. I hope he didn’t pick up on my look of disgust.

“Well, do you mind if I practice my English with you? Do you know much about irregular verbs? They are so hard. Can help me with irregular verbs?” The look on his sweaty face expressed one long pitiful “pleeeeeeeeeease.” Of course I didn’t want to help him with his verbs, but he was so earnest, so whole-hearted and, besides, maybe he could speak some Spanish to me as well. I asked him about the irregulars he knew already and, after a few minutes of painful discussion, we moved on to what he really wanted: some open-ended conversation. I asked him, “What do you do?”

“What?” he asked.

“What do you do?”

“Oh, I work HP. A technician. I answer questions when people’s printers break.”

So you take phone calls from the United States,” I asked.

“Huh?”

I realized that he needed repetition when the words or the language structure were unfamiliar, so I slowed down a tad. I was able to relate, since I often need Spanish utterances directed towards me two times before I got it.

“Why...do...you...want...to...learn English?” I asked.

“So I can speak to anyone in the world and be anywhere in the world and able to talk to people.

English is the international language. And it's language of businesses. I can get a high paying job with English."

Bernard was his name, and he was about twenty years old. He finished high school but I am not sure if he passed his Bachillero exam, which qualifies students for university. He was in a technician training program, learning how to take overseas phone calls from buyers of HP printers who have technical problems. He was very passionate about this work. Language was not part of his training, however.

"I need someone to talk with. I watch television, like the Food Channel and the Home and Garden Channel." I recommended that he read English texts everyday, such as the newspaper, and translate unfamiliar words and study these. I also suggested he find and listen to instructional tapes.

"My plan is to be the *jefe* (boss) some day. The company will pay for my university so my plan is to study German, Portuguese, French too." He wanted to attend one of the private universities in Heredia at night so he could continue working during the day. "The company will pay 80% for university."

"Listen, Bernard," I said, "tell your *jefe* that I said that more language training should be part of your training. It'll make you more effective when people call you on the phone. Tell him I said this." He laughed. I was serious. His English, though considerably better than my Spanish, was not strong and I envisioned phone calls from printer-disabled customers in North America who, instead of focusing on computer problems, would get mired in linguistic snafus.

Bernard was unambiguously optimistic and passionate about his goals, the learning of English and the other languages. He was completely undaunted by the task of learning these languages. Given his age and commitment, I thought he could do it. He got off the bus before me. When I finally exited the bus, I felt invigorated by my encounter with this optimistic and passionate young man, but my excitement for this fellow was shadowed by a bit of concern.

There are thousands of Bernards in Costa Rica and throughout the non-English speaking world. The drive to learn English here is almost a national imperative. There are private English conversation schools in every city and even in small towns in Costa Rica. Universities require the reading of English as a graduation requirement. English is one of the areas of focus in private technical colleges. English is taught in public schools starting in the first grade, and increasingly English teaching begins at the kindergarten level.

Private schools, which now enroll 10% of the students in the country, market English heavily to recruit new students. Private schools typically offer at least two hours of English instruction, and it is often integrated into the teaching of the content areas, such as science and mathematics. Many of the private schools are truly bilingual, so the elite send their children to private schools where the courses

are taught primarily in English. When I ask parents why they send their children to private schools, their first reason is usually the "emphasis on English."

***The drive to learn English here is almost a national imperative.***

English first came to Costa Rica with the immigration of West-Indies Africans in the late 1800s. They came here to work on the railroad linking the banana plantations with the Limon port on the Caribbean (Aguilar-Sanchez, 2005). Most of the descendents of these workers still live in the country, mostly in and around Limon, and most are bilingual in English and Spanish. While the parents and grandparents of these mostly Jamaican-Africans spoke only English, state-sponsored Spanish, as it is taught in the schools and spoken in the media, has resulted in 80% of African-Costa Ricans becoming bilingual.

While English was formally introduced in the high school curriculum in 1824, since the 1940s the reading of English has been a requirement for university graduation. The expansion of English teaching and an apparent consensus regarding the importance of English has occurred since 1990 with the emergence of the tourist industry and the influx of foreign investment and immigration of United States citizens. The discourse of English, particularly a discourse that valorizes the importance of English to the Costa Rican

economy and society, is dominant here and is typical of the strength of this discourse around the world. In the words of one Costa Rican educator:

Globalization has always been on the minds of our people. Last century, we became global by being one of the first nations to install electric lights.... We continue to be global into the next millennium by putting computers in the classrooms and teaching English to our younger generations, to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to become citizens of the world.

(Cabrera & Ancker, in Aguilar-Sanchez, 2005)

There are several factors driving the process of English as a national aspiration (Aguilar-Sanchez, 2005). The proliferation of the tourist industry since the late 1980s has resulted in a rapid increase in the numbers of Costa Ricans who need or aspire to speak English. Related to the increase of tourism, there has been a surge of retirees from the United States and Europe, and this has a similar effect on the motivation of *Ticos* to speak English. A huge number of international research projects are based in Costa Rican reserves and parks, so the influx of this largely English-speaking scientific community is another influence on the English movement here.

Of course, the central driving force behind Costa Ricans' motivation to learn English is economic and the desire for an improved economic position (Aguilar-Sanchez, 2005). Much foreign investment depends on the quality of the literacy of the local population, and international companies require, first and foremost, a critical mass of locals who can speak English. Besides having a local employment base that has technical skills, companies look for employees who can speak English. A large Intel plant came to the country in 1997, and it required that its employees be able to read, write, speak and listen in English. The Intel move in 1997 probably triggered an expansion of English teaching in the schools, which in this year moved English teaching to the elementary school, beginning in first grade.

Some authors, such as Aguilar-Sanchez (2005), take a technical/instrumental view of language learning and the teaching of English around the world. However, more critical perspectives recognize that the globalization of English is problematic, and it poses both dangerous and useful possibilities for world cultures. One danger here is a dimension of linguistic imperialism in the spread of English. Clearly, this spread of English into the cultural and economic life throughout the world causes alarm and anger among many people. For example, in the African context, Ngugi (1993) asserts:

A new world order that is more than a global dominance of neo-colonial relations policed by a handful of Western nations ... is a disaster for the peoples of the world and their cultures.... The languages of English (are) taught as if they (are) our

own languages, as if African had no tongues except those brought by imperialism, bearing the label, MADE IN ENGLISH (35).

***more critical perspectives recognize that the globalization of English is problematic, and it poses both dangerous and useful possibilities for world cultures***

Others argue that English in the past had clear and obvious imperialist and colonial goals, like those pursued by the British in the 19th century and the US in the 20th century. Before the present neo-liberal moment (starting around 1980), English was explicitly linked to power and the imperialistic goals of these two English-speaking powers. The teaching and global spread of English "is distinguished from previous historical moments of linguistic expansion ... by the claim that ... it is not being artificially or externally imposed (Kayman, 2004, 3).

The teaching of English now, in developing countries, is divorced from its cultural components, for example teaching that is embedded in literature, so it appears free from ideological intentions. However, English is neutral "only in the sense that it no longer bears the mark of a colonial or imperial centre, but it functions as a tool to achieve economic development in the market" (Narkunas, 2005, 42). The dilemma for post colonial peoples is that they need English for practical reasons (for instance, to be part of new world economy, to claim a portion of new wealth), but the users of "market English" run the "apparently unavoid-

able risk of co-option, of acquiescing in the negation of their own understandings of reality and in the accompanying denial or even subversion of their own interests” (Kandiah, 2001, p. 112).

Phillips (2001) is especially critical of how world English is taught, and he argues that English can and should be embedded in local cultures and goals. English can strengthen the “local language ecology,” he suggests. However, the danger is when there is the promotion of “one language (English) and one culture (USA) at the expense of others, by means of the interlocking of linguistic imperialism with a system of production and ideologies that attempt to justify an economically expansive and exploitative world order” (Phillips, 2001, p. 193).

Phillips notes that most English language textbooks used throughout the world reflect a Western (that is, British or American) perspective on the world. Instead, he advocates for a version of English, called the Ecology of Languages Perspective, that is more democratic and pluralistic. “... it builds in its own linguistic and cultural diversity, attempts to ensure equality for speakers of all languages, uses the human rights system as a counterweight to the ‘free market’” (p. 193). Kayman argues that even the communicative approach to the teaching of English, currently the dominant pedagogic approach, which valorizes communication and marginalizes culture and history, still does reflect “cultural assumptions (that are) embedded in the ascribed situations, notions, and functions it is designed to serve.”

Clayton (2005) acknowledges that “... the hegemony of English (exists) with other hegemonic processes (diffusion of consent to the neo-liberal agenda, for example) [that enhances] a global class structure that, while flexible and dynamic, remains fundamentally asymmetrical and exploitative” (p. 132). However, he is critical of an overly deterministic view of Global English as a bad thing. English can serve the interests of nations, such as India, Malaysia, and Singapore, especially when there is a colonial tradition of English on which to build.

The globalization of English does allow world peoples to talk to each other. Another response to

linguistic hegemony is resistance, when nations or cultural groups fight or redefine the spread of English by, for example, promoting local, national or indigenous languages as accompanying languages in bilingual (Canada) or multilingual (South Africa) societies. However, the most common response to the spread of English appears to be accommodation, whereby the players make decisions to accept the hegemonic language(s) in some forms.

A piece by Nino-Murcia (2003) leaves one feeling ambivalent about the globalization of English. As others have, he noted that English competency in developing countries relates to the social and economic position of people. For example, the most privileged citizens send their children to bilingual schools or those expensive private schools that teach their curricula in English with native-English speaking teachers. A small group of elite is able to send their children overseas to perfect their English language and Western manners so they can fully exploit market opportunities.

***Another response to linguistic hegemony is resistance, when nations or cultural groups fight or redefine the spread of English***

Most of the populations in the developing world (under the age of forty and those not in abject poverty) dream of English competency, which they view as the “ticket” to membership in the global market community. However, for the masses who do not have the means to attend private schools or travel overseas, learning English is very challenging and most tend not to progress to a level of functional proficiency. Still, I have met *Ticos* of modest means who have achieved some competency, although they have never traveled overseas or studied in a private school. These are individuals who are driven to learn English, and they typically will have engaged in auto-didactic strategies like watching copious amounts of television and movies and listening to music.

Regrettably, the public school English programs in Costa Rica and most peripheral nations focus on reading/writing (not on speaking), and these nations suffer from a dearth of teachers skilled at speaking English. The endemic examinations in English (after the 6<sup>th</sup> grade) are basically reading comprehension tasks, not infrequently written in stilted English and with poorly constructed test items. Besides, there are virtually nonexistent opportunities for most students to speak with native-English speakers.

In the end, the polarization of society's children into public or private education serves to reproduce groups of have-nots and haves, of course reflecting larger socioeconomic class relations: for the most part, students with family resources learn English and students without resources do not. In addition, I also wonder about the kinds of employment for which English qualifies most people who learn English in developing countries, such as working as clerks and waiters in tourist hotels or call-answering centers. The linguistic form needed for positions in most of the new economy is what Narkunas calls "market English," which is a bare-bones, minimalist, instrumentalist type of language that does not require cultural understandings or nuanced forms. Getting outside my privileged North American skin, I need to remember that, for them, these jobs represent an improvement over what they would be doing otherwise, like working construction, lugging boulders to make way for new roads or houses, and so forth.

I've seen references to the idea of the fourth world, segments of societies in both core and peripheral nations which have essentially been left behind economically. In rich nations and more so in developing nations, especially in Africa, there are populations rural and urban that are chronically poor, illiterate, and disenfranchised. In India, perhaps a large minority of citizens are benefiting from globalization and their knowledge of English. Still, there are 350 million citizens living in abject poverty, people for whom decent housing, health and education let alone English proficiency are remote possibilities.

Globalization leads us to envision transnational systems of government. While there is clearly a north-south order of things when it comes to economic haves and have-nots, and access to resources including English is differential within "nations," so it is useful to "locate English as working ... among co-existing groups with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and some degree of autonomy from each other" (Nino-Murcia, 2003, p. 122).

It appears that there are almost structural dimensions to the unequal playing field in the globalization of English, determining who is able to take advantage of it and who is not. For example, native-

English speakers from core countries like the US and England appear to have an advantage in the competitive international worlds of academia, research and commerce, since second language speakers (even the elite, professional classes in non-English countries) are never quite as fluid and subtle in their use of English as are native-English speakers. Then, the elites in the peripheral countries are at an advantage over their working class or working poor compatriots. Subsequently, the various levels of English proficiency that these groups are able to develop signal another inequality, which then enables the elite to access more resources and wealth than the non-elite. Finally, there are the masses of bottom feeders, the fourth world citizens, for whom English is unobtainable. This situation, in the end, severely disadvantages them in the new economy. For them, English will remain just a metaphor for hope.

What are the implications of all this for workers in the field teaching English, that is, well-intentioned language workers who are sensitive to the risks and dangers of cultural imperialism? For me, the answer lies with our

*to withhold the teaching of English because it offends our idealistic or principled notions of social/cultural justice is wrong*

students and their felt desires and needs to learn English as a vehicle to better their lives in the global economy. Many of our students live in near poverty, and English fluency can, indeed, facilitate a better job, more income, more security for them and their families.

I think to withhold the teaching of English because it offends our idealistic or principled notions of social/cultural justice is wrong, since it only serves to promote the interests of the elite who will learn English without me and without the neighborhood English programs that are set up for the masses. By learning English, these low-incomers have an opportunity to increase their leverage in the market and, perhaps, improve their economic chances and those of their progeny. Certainly, my curriculum and teaching will be more connected to local cultures and the personalities of my students, and I will avoid cultural language renditions that marginalize my students' prior knowledge, interests and cultures. Besides arguing for a culturally sensitive approach to the teaching of English, the only other pertinent task

is to promote English for everyone. Everyone. This is the least I can do.

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Figure 1. Oxcart Festival. Photo by K. Winograd

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# ***Understanding Arab Students***

*Susan Matson, ELS Language Centers*

*Mark Algren, University of Kansas*

*Editor's note: Instead of the standard book review format, Matson and Algren have reviewed Nydell's book, extracted relevant cultural traits, and applied them to the IEP setting.*

## **A Growing Need for Awareness**

Recently, many intensive English programs (IEPs) throughout the United States have been inundated with Saudi students. From 2001-2005, due to either a real or perceived hiatus on visa issuance for students from the seventeen Arab countries in the aftermath of 9/11, the enrollment of Arabs in American IEPs slowed to a trickle, or in some cases, stopped altogether. However, university-sponsored and proprietary IEP programs finally started to see real enrollment recovery late in 2005 and early this year due to the unanticipated windfall of the Saudi Cultural Mission Scholarship program which expects to have disbursed up to 10,000 scholarships by the end of 2006. Numbers have not yet been released for 2007, but projections are optimistic that the Saudis will keep coming for at least the next two years.

The extraordinary influx of students means major logistical and curricular accommodations have to be made. IEPs must provide more services, ranging from homestays and dorm space to textbook stocks, not to mention teachers, of which there suddenly seems to be a shortage. Curricula and approaches to teaching have been affected, too. A number of programs closed after 9/11, and surviving programs depended on Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese enrollments. As a result, some IEP programs shifted to accommodate a cultural profile of students who typically arrived with a long tradition of learning through reading and writing.

Since the incoming Arab students have a tradition of learning through speaking and listening, new challenges have arisen. Certainly most are

motivated and cooperative. They've been eager to speak in conversation-based classes and make highly valued contributions. However, they are hampered in part by a lack of strong reading/writing skills.

Culturally based behaviors, both in and outside of the classroom, sometimes puzzle teachers. Arab students seem inclined to negotiate excessively for grades, especially when they are in danger of failing. They seem prone to helping friends on assignments and quizzes to the extent that might be considered cheating by their teachers. They appear to think that rules and regulations are more flexible than they are. If Arab students have made friends with influential persons on campus, they may appeal to those people for help or special dispensation in classroom matters. Simple debates in conversation class can be far more passionate than teachers are accustomed to dealing with. And with at least some Arab students, there are issues with tardiness and absenteeism. When these behaviors occur frequently and their causes are not fully understood, the essential trust that should bind students and educators is put at risk. What's an IEP to do?

## **Understanding Arab Cultural Behavior**

Increasingly, IEPs are turning to Arab-specific treatises such as *Understanding Arabs: A Guide for Modern Times* (Margaret Nydell, Boston: Intercultural Press, Fourth edition) to shed light on Arab culture and how it affects classroom behavior. The latest version is an update of her popular 1988 book. The particular advantage of the 2006 imprint is a new introduction in which the author movingly refers to 9/11. In it, Nydell recounts leaving downtown Washington on the day of the attacks and personally commiserating with a Pakistani Muslim taxi driver who was deeply sympathetic to the

victims. It is clear that she understands the experience of Americans and also the Arab mindset.

Here, Nydell takes care to straighten out the common American confusion over labels such as *Arab* (referring to all nations where Arabic is the primary spoken language) and *Muslim* (referring to all worshippers of Islam regardless of country of origin). She also refutes inflammatory political statements based on popular misconceptions. It is essential for all educators working with Arabs to understand the political ramifications of the 9/11 attacks and to appreciate, at a visceral level, that Arab students come to us in trust to be educated. These students separate the actions of the US government from Americans in general and do not, as a group, come with a predetermined political agenda. Nydell, a pre-eminent Middle Eastern specialist with extensive travel throughout the Arab world and fluency in a range of Arabic dialects, is well prepared to explain these issues. She does so simply, clearly, and without prejudice or bias.

## Cultural Differences

For these reasons alone, the book is worth a place on any IEP resource shelf, and it is recommended reading for teachers who haven't taught Arabs before. Nydell's descriptions and recommendations are intended to be practical, and she shows special acuity in describing cultural traits as observed in Arab countries. For example, if you are a Canadian petroleum engineer in Cairo, should you arrive at a dinner party on time, or fashionably late? If you are a female support staffer in Yemen, should you arrive expecting to go out on the street fully covered? This book as a whole, and the last chapter in particular ("The Arab Countries: Similarities and Differences"), spells out these necessities of protocol.

Nydell doesn't stint on details of cultural differences. She ferrets out several core characteristics that are common to Arabs, as evidenced by her chapter titles:

- Introduction: Patterns of Change
- 1 Beliefs and Values
- 2 Friends and Strangers
- 3 Emotion and Logic
- 4 Getting Personal
- 5 Men and Women
- 6 Social Formalities and Etiquette
- 7 The Social Structure

- 8 The Role of the Family
- 9 Religion and Society
- 10 Communicating with Arabs
- 11 Islamic Fundamentalism
- 12 Anti-Americanism
- 13 Arabs and Muslims in the West
- 14 The Arab Countries: Similarities and Differences

The first ten chapters and Chapter 14 are especially useful to ESL instructors because they explicate the cultural traits that individuals are likely to carry with them into any setting. Chapters 11 and 12 help explain trends in attitudes rather than cultural traits. Chapter 13 provides a demographic description. Chapter 14 provides useful information about differences among the Middle Eastern countries.

## Applicability to IEPs

Because Nydell's experience of Arabs has been almost exclusively in Arab countries and in business settings, some of the traits that she identifies may not be apropos to educational settings in the United States. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of material that is germane to the needs of IEPs. Instructors, in particular, need to know what to expect so that behaviors will not be interpreted as personalized responses to situations within the control of the instructor.

For example, if an Arab student dominates a classroom discussion while slighting others who try to respond, instructors will be more likely to realize it is (to Arabs) a non-offensive cultural trait (gregariousness in a public setting) rather than a display of discourtesy, manageable by establishing ground rules at the start of a course.

Here, then, are some of the traits which seem to be common to most Arabs as discussed in Nydell's book. Only broad strokes are presented here. We strongly recommend reading the book for enlightening details.

In Chapter One, Nydell discusses Arab beliefs and values, noting that these "determine their outlook on life and govern their social behavior" (p. 13). She acknowledges that she is making broad generalizations, but points out that while there is great diversity in "foods, manner of dress, housing, decorative arts, [and] governmental systems," there is still much homogeneity in their beliefs and values (p. 14).

Central to Arab thought is the belief that “many, if not most, things in life are controlled, ultimately, by fate rather than by humans; that everyone loves children; that wisdom increases with age; and that the inherent personalities of men and women are vastly different” (p. 13). Specific values which may influence classroom behavior include:

- ◆ It is important to behave at all times in a way that will create a good impression on others.
- ◆ A person’s dignity, honor, and reputation are of paramount importance, and no effort should be spared to protect them. Honor (or shame) is often viewed as collective, pertaining to the entire family or group.
- ◆ Loyalty to one’s family takes precedence over personal preferences.
- ◆ Social class and family background are the major determining factors of personal status, followed by individual character and achievement.
- ◆ Social morality standards should be maintained, through laws if necessary. (p. 15)

In Chapter Two, Nydell discusses friends and strangers. Here, we find that it is “*the duty of a friend to give help and do favors to the best of his or her ability*” (p. 17). No wonder that some students can’t resist trying to help their friends on quizzes. Further, “good manners require that one never openly refuse a request from a friend” (p. 17).

For example, after students feel that they have befriended an instructor, they may ask for favors, such as help gaining admission to a university. Observing the Arab concept of good manners, you should not bluntly refuse the request, even if the proposal seems absurd or unworkable. Nydell advises responding by expressing your good will and saying that you will do your best to try to accommodate the request. This is because “*an oral promise has its own value as a response*” (p. 18).

Later, when you let the students know that you cannot grant their requests, they will most likely be gracious and not ask for an explanation. It should be noted that if a student promises to do something for you, for example, to finish a project by a certain date, the student may be giving the answer you expect, but

the student will also understand that the “*Yes* should not always be taken literally” (p. 19). In fact, the student may append the phrase *Inshallah* (if God wills).

This may seem to a Westerner as a sort of hedge, but in the Arab’s mind, it is called for culturally (p. 19). Understanding a student’s thinking this way can be helpful in explaining to students how they need to adjust to the American university expectation of observing deadlines and keeping promises.

Criticism needs to be handled delicately. “It should be indirect and include praise of any good points first, accompanied by assurances of high regard for the individual. To preserve the person’s dignity, avoid criticism in front of others” (p. 24). Nydell gives the following example of a way to phrase constructive criticism: “You are doing excellent work here, and this is a good report. We need to revise a few things, however; let’s look at this again and work through it together, so we can make it even better.”

From time to time, a distressed student may send an intermediary to your office to plead on

his or her behalf. In this case, the intermediary is believed to know you well and therefore have the ability to influence you (having *wasta*). *Wasta* can work both ways. If you are having trouble with a particular student or group of students, you may be able to use a respected intermediary to solve the problem.

In Chapter Three, “Emotion and Logic,” we learn that for Arabs, subjectivity is highly valued while objectivity is sometimes suspect. As a result, you may sometimes see displays of emotion and personal feelings. To the Western mind, this may seem immature, but to the Arab, it is highly valued (p. 27). “Arabs consciously reserve the right to look at the world in a subjective way, particularly if a more objective assessment of a situation would bring to mind a more painful truth” (p. 28). An Arab would therefore be more inclined to skirt the obvious, then become “angry and defensive, insisting that the situation is not as you describe it” (p. 28).

Fatalism is an important part of traditional Arab thinking. It is founded on the belief that “God has

***If you are having trouble with a particular student or group of students, you may be able to use a respected intermediary to solve the problem.***

direct and ultimate control of all that happens. If something goes wrong, people can absolve themselves of blame or can justify doing nothing to make improvements or changes by assigning the cause to God's will" (p. 28). To a Westerner, this may seem like a loophole or a way to avoid taking responsibility for one's actions.

The idea of fatalism is connected to the Arab subjective view of reality. "If Arabs feel that something threatens their personal dignity, they may be obliged to deny it, even in the face of facts to the contrary .... To Arabs, honor is more important than facts" (p. 29). In fact, Arabs are inclined to personalize everything in life. "*People are more important than rules*" (p. 31). "They have a long tradition of personal appeal to authorities for exception to rules .... They do not accept predetermined standards if these standards are a personal inconvenience." Predictably, then, some students will complain about being held back on the basis of low grades, and others may object to level placements based on testing.

Be prepared for seemingly excessive displays of emotion on certain issues. Negotiation and persuasion are highly developed skills in the Middle East, and are often accompanied by "verbal cleverness ... charm, applying personal pressure, engaging in personal appeals" (p. 31) and a great deal of emotion. Don't be put off by the latter. According to Nydell, "*Emotion connotes deep and sincere concern for the substance of the discussion*" (p. 31).

In Chapter Four, "Getting Personal," Nydell notes that "the concept of what constitutes personal behavior or a personal question is culturally determined, and there are marked differences between Westerners and Arabs" (p. 33). As an instructor, you will sometimes want to share information about yourself to establish rapport. For Arabs, questions about marital status or salary are not off limits as they are here, and you can redirect the conversation as needed. For your part, be sure to avoid asking about an Arab man's female relatives. It is better to ask about "the family" (p. 34). Similarly, don't be surprised if Arab men write only about male relatives in essays about family. Nydell says that you can "tell when you have brought up a sensitive subject when

[your student] evades a direct answer to your questions. If you receive evasive answers, don't press further" (p. 35).

Physical proximity is also culturally determined. Arabs tend to "stand and sit closer and to touch other people (of the same sex) more than Westerners do" (p. 35). People of the same sex also hold hands, and kissing on the cheeks is common. An Arab would prefer to sit next to a stranger in an otherwise empty room rather than take a seat some distance away. In the West, one has one's personal space as a sort of protective bubble around oneself, whereas an Arab can be much more open to noise input, touching and piercing gazes.

Chapter Five, discussing gender relationships in the context of honor, points out that Arab men and women are careful about public behavior between the sexes. "*Arabs quickly gain a negative impression if you behave with too much (presumed)*

*familiarity toward a person of the opposite sex...* . They will conclude that you are a person of low moral standards" (p. 44). Even

public displays of affection between married partners is offensive, or at least highly embarrassing, to Arabs (p. 45). In Arab countries, both men and women are expected to dress respectfully. In the West, the more liberal Arabs may tolerate women whose legs and arms are uncovered, but the more conservative may be offended.

As for social formalities, Chapter 6 points out that "*Good manners constitute the most salient factor in evaluating a person's character*" (p. 55). Above all, Arabs have a high regard for generosity. Stinginess and inhospitality are anathema. If you are invited to the home of one of your students, go with an empty stomach and expect to be doted on and plied with great quantities of food and drink. Always eat or drink at least a small amount, as it would be offensive to refuse, no matter how full you may be. It is the duty of a good host to offer seconds and thirds, sometimes rather insistently. Take what is offered, although you do not have to finish everything on your second plate. Be sure to lavish praise, admiration and gratitude for the food (p. 60). You will probably be offered coffee or tea; remember to receive and hold the cup with your right hand. If you plan to host Arab

***Stinginess and inhospitality are anathema.***

students at a dinner at your home, it would be wise to prepare far more food than can be eaten. Avoid serving pork (forbidden to Muslims), even as a separate dish. If you cook with alcohol, be sure to label the dishes that contain it as some will choose not to eat them. If you serve alcoholic beverages, provide non-alcoholic drinks, too (p. 62). In general, you are least likely to cause embarrassment or offense by simply avoiding pork and alcohol.

Chapter Seven deals with social structures, evidence of which you will probably not detect in academic situations. Chapter Eight explores the role of the family. The most important message in this chapter is the fact that “*Family loyalty and obligations take precedence over loyalty to friends or the demands of a job*” (p. 71). At school, this means that if the family needs something, the student is obliged to attend to it, even if it means missing class or being late. Family comes first.

Responsibility for the welfare of the family “rests heavily on older men in the extended family and on older sons in the immediate family” (p. 73). When a family member back home is in distress (ill or hospitalized, for example), some students will feel that they should stay at home to be 100% available to make or receive phone calls. This can also explain (sometimes) answering phones in class and then exiting to the hallway to talk. Arabs never speak disparagingly about their families, and would be “very surprised if someone talks about poverty and disadvantages experienced in early life” (p. 79) when such humble information need not be disclosed. Therefore, be very careful when you disclose facts about your family life. “If you do not have positive things to say about your family, things that will incline Arabs to admiration, it is best to avoid the subject” (p. 79).

Chapter Nine deals with religion and society. There is no room for non-believers, and Nydell advises, “If you have no religious affiliation or are an atheist, this should not be mentioned” (p. 81). Islam permeates all aspects of the Arab’s life. During the school year, it is likely that Ramadan will be observed. Muslims are required to fast from sun up to sun down. If afternoon or evening classes run late, time should be allowed for students to break their

fast. Although social custom and sometimes laws require non-Muslims in Arab countries to observe Ramadan requirements while in public, few students would expect similar observance by non-Muslims here. However, it would be tactful to avoid eating, drinking, or smoking in daylight hours in front of Muslim students, notably in one-on-one situations such as an office visit.

As language teachers, we are highly interested in communication. In Chapter Ten, Nydell sheds light on the Arabic language. She notes that Arabic writing is in Classical Arabic which, though it has “evolved into Modern Standard Arabic to accommodate new words and usages” (p. 94), is still considered sacred to Arabs. Because there are many dialects of Arabic, Classical (Modern Standard) Arabic can be interspersed into Colloquial Arabic to enable communication between Arabs from different regions. “It is not

an exaggeration to say that *Arabs are passionately in love with their language*” (p. 95). It is for them, after all, the language that God chose to reveal His message.

While difficult to master, it has many strengths, including the easy coining of new words (p. 95).

Of special interest to ESL writing and speaking instructors is the fact that “Eloquence is emphasized and admired in the Arab world far more than in the West” (p. 97). When Westerners read or hear long-winded, sometimes repetitious or somewhat emotional discourse, they fail to realize that to an Arab, “*how you say something is as important as what you have to say*” (p. 97). The Western pattern of hierarchical organization, with an introduction, thesis, logical sequence of topics supported by data and summed up in a conclusion doesn’t make much sense to an Arab, whose first priority is emotional impact. Conversely, if you, the Westerner, “speak softly and make your statements only once, Arabs may wonder if you really mean what you are saying” (p. 98). The lesson here is that to have an effect, repeat it several times and be consistent about the message.

Words have power. Because words are taken quite literally, “the use of curses and obscenities is very offensive to Arabs. If words have power and can affect events, it is feared that curses may bring

***Family loyalty and obligations take precedence over loyalty to friends or the demands of a job***

misfortune just by being uttered” (p. 99). Arabs will avoid certain words for fear that the thing will become reality. Therefore, euphemisms are used as a kind of mutually understood code. For instance, an Arab would rather say that someone has “the disease” than to say that he has “cancer” or he is “a little tired” rather than that he has been seriously injured (p.100). The written word is highly respected. Words from the Qur’an are sacred, no matter where they are written. If a student writes a Qur’anic blessing at the top of his or her homework paper, it is advisable to handle that paper with respect. Don’t allow it to drop on the floor, set a drink on it, or erase it.

## Behavior of Arab Students Abroad: A Survey

It should be noted that not all of these behaviors are always manifested when Arab students live abroad. Many Gulf Arab students come to the US with significant cultural information resulting from visits, hearsay, the media, or pre-departure orientations. While not all information is equally accurate, some ideas may lead students to modify customary behaviors. Alternatively, we reasoned, Arabs may, through observation or IEP orientation, learn quickly that some of their usual at-home behaviors (frequent public smoking without asking permission of a bystander, for example) are ill advised in the American setting.

The authors wanted to find out if many modifications in fact are taking place. If so, then Nydell’s conclusions may be questionable for US educators. In evaluating her work, it is important to avoid stereotyping either groups of students or individuals. Accordingly, the authors created a survey (available with the cover letter and statistics on the *ORTESOL Journal* Web site at <http://www.ortesol.org/>) parsed from *Understanding Arabs* to see which cultural traits listed by Nydell could be:

- ◆ reasonably expected to be observed in an educational (classroom or excursion) setting;
- ◆ reasonably be expected to be evident in the United States; or
- ◆ seen as either positive or negative, depending on the management capabilities of instructors and administrators.

## Findings

The survey was distributed to the forty-two ELS Language Centers in the United States as well as to IEP instructors in the Applied English Center at the University of Kansas. Five traits were observed to a high degree by 94% or more of the respondents:

1. Friends have the duty to help friends (this could include helping friends with tests, papers, etc.).
2. People (and helping other people) are more important than rules and regulations.
3. Personal influence is a useful way of getting things done (in other words, getting someone to bend or circumvent the rules for me).
4. You should be able to modify any rule on the basis of compelling personal need.
5. Family obligations (for example, illness of a family member), means that you shouldn’t hold me to the rules on attendance.

Another six traits were observed to a moderate degree by 94% or more of the respondents.

6. A promise made has its own value, but people can’t always be held responsible for actual follow-through (i.e., I can promise to do something, but I can’t be held responsible if it doesn’t happen; maybe there were factors beyond my control.).
7. Any form of public criticism is a personal insult to honor.
8. The emotional impact of an event is just as important as the actual facts (facts may be denied as a way of saving face).
9. Stated times (class start time and the like) are flexible: lateness should not be an issue.
10. You should never speak ill of your family members or admit that you come from poor circumstances or a disadvantaged family.
11. The ability to speak well and at length is an important skill.

## Implications

In all, our survey validated that the Arab cultural traits identified by Nydell in overseas and business settings are all exhibited to greater or lesser degrees in American educational settings. Some appear softened in a new and alien context (the US), but to a surprising extent appear to be constant. It is also

noteworthy that two respondents plus one of the authors, all with extensive work experience in the Middle East, observed: “if overseas, all of the traits are expressed!”

For these reasons, we recommend the use of *Understanding Arabs* as assigned and/or recommended reading in every IEP setting. Additionally, because members of a culture are often unaware or only vaguely aware of their own culture’s values and assumptions, we recommend reading books on American culture written for non-Americans, such as Gary Althen’s *American Ways*. A greater awareness of our own deeply-held values and beliefs will assist in making comparisons to Arab cultural traits and will be useful in devising ways to help Arab students understand and adapt to the new culture in which they are living.

The authors also recommend that IEP staff in programs with significant Arab populations take the time to discuss the implications of Nydell’s work, once it is widely read. We do know from experience that Arab students can be brought around to both an understanding and an appreciation of the values that underlie IEP conventions, rules and processes. Nydell’s work suggests ways for making that happen faster and more efficiently, so that everyone benefits. Some of them are:

- ◆ well-designed student orientations, with procedures explained both verbally and in writing;
- ◆ at least a rudimentary understanding of key Arab-English differences (cf. Bernard Smith, “Arabic Speakers,” pp.195-213, in Swan & Smith);
- ◆ the use of successfully adjusted Arabs to help broker thorny situations;
- ◆ course descriptions with specific and non-negotiable guidelines for attendance and grades;
- ◆ a willingness to keep an open door for discussions, but the ability to close discussions politely but firmly, after a decision has been made;

- ◆ consistency at all times in how policies are applied; and
- ◆ a genuine and abiding interest in Arab students and their challenges.

Lastly, we recommend that you take the time to enjoy Arab students, their perspectives, and their values. Without question, 2006 and forward will provide rich opportunities to grow personally and professionally by means of this special population.

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# Creating a Multi-Cultural, Student-Centered Classroom

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The population of United States is among the most diverse in the world. However, the majority of K-12 teachers in the U.S. are relatively homogeneous: of European descent, female, native English speakers, and middle-class. According to 2004-2005 school data, about twenty-seven percent of students in the average Oregon K-12 classroom were from minority groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006) and eleven percent had a language other than English as their first language (Office of English Language Acquisition, 2005). The number of teachers in Oregon who represent minorities is much smaller. In the Portland School District, with about a 40% minority population, only about 12% of teachers are themselves members of minority groups (Murphy, 2005).

Since so few teachers are themselves members of minority groups, many teachers in the United States are left unprepared to deal with language and cultural barriers that can lead to high student attrition rates, boredom, and non-engagement in the classroom. To prevent these problems, effective instructional strategies must be derived from the cultures of all students and their families, not just those of the teachers or dominant group.

## Current Challenges

K-12 teachers face many challenges in dealing with both newly arrived and second-generation immigrant students who lack mastery not only of English, but possibly also of their own native spoken and written language. In addition to a language barrier, students face socio-cultural barriers as seen in school curriculums that reflect the culture and

values of the dominant society and largely ignore or denigrate students' ethnic backgrounds (Gollnick and Chinn, 2006).

For example, many schools have set aside the month of February to celebrate black history. Although this may be a helpful strategy for learning about a specific ethnic group, it often precludes the integration of contributions and experiences of African-Americans and other ethnic groups into the regular curriculum the rest of the year. The learning advantage in these cases goes to the students of the dominant group because school curriculum is almost always centered on their culture (Gollnick and Chinn, p. 103).

*In addition to this culturally-biased curriculum, traditional teaching practices favor Western beliefs about individualism and competition.*

Being culturally responsive pedagogically is important for all teachers, yet the current curriculum used in U.S. schools supports the superiority of Western thought over all others and provides minimal or no introduction to the non-Western cultures of Asia, Africa, and South and Central America (Gollnick and Chinn, 2006). A high percentage of many students who belong to different ethnic groups, especially Hispanic students, drop out every year because the curriculum is boring to them and they do not identify with it (Nieto, 2006).

In addition to this culturally-biased curriculum, traditional teaching practices favor Western beliefs about individualism and competition. We still observe math teachers sitting at the front of the room, assigning a math problem, and asking students to work on the problem for the rest of the class period (Freeman and Freeman, 1998). Reading teachers often have students sit quietly reading a book for the entire class period and then answer questions at the end of the

summary without any interaction with the teacher or other students. Schools need to provide environments in which students can learn to participate in the dominant society while maintaining connections to their distinct ethnicities if they choose. Respect for and support of ethnic differences will be essential for all teachers in this effort.

This article will describe how teachers can better understand cultural differences and their own biases, adapt lessons using students' own prior learning experiences, use non-traditional assessment tools, and involve parents to create a successful multi-cultural, student-centered classroom. Doing so not only benefits minority student groups but also opens teachers and the dominant group's minds to a whole new world—one in which all people and their cultures are valued.

## Understanding Student Differences

Many in-service and pre-service teachers are aware of individual differences in learning style. However, according to Cho and DeCastro-Ambresetti, many pre-service teachers expressed a sense of being ill-equipped to teach students from diverse backgrounds (2005). One reason, according to Cho and DeCastro-Ambresetti, is that many students from different cultural backgrounds are stereotyped as “failures” or “trouble makers” because of high dropout rates.

Throughout our research on how to help teachers be more pedagogically responsive, we discovered that many have stereotypical beliefs about students from different cultural backgrounds, such as: African American students don't learn as well as white students; Hispanic parents do not value education; or Asian students do not participate in classroom discussions. While many teachers understand and respect different learning styles in individual students, they also need to be aware that “students have different areas of talent and difficulty, different priority experiences, interests and goals” (Knapp, 2005, p. 202).

Here are some examples of typical U.S. classroom values that may or may not be shared by students and their parents from different backgrounds:

*Independence:* Teachers from the dominant culture in the U.S. value and promote

student independence, while students from other backgrounds might place greater importance on both cooperation and interdependence.

*Public praise:* Many teachers from mainstream culture over-praise to build their students' self-esteem, while some students from different backgrounds might not be comfortable receiving praise in public.

*Oral expression:* Many educators in this country believe that students must express themselves, always engage in class discussions and use critical thinking skills. Some parents from different cultural backgrounds might think quiet students learn more and are more respectful than the ones who speak up (Escobar-Ortloff & Ortloff, 2003).

While these examples are very broad generalizations, they underscore the importance for teachers to understand and accept the cultural differences in their students before pointing out students' misbehavior, under-achievement, or spoken and written errors in English. Teachers need to remember that something that seems important and acceptable to them may not be so to a student from a different cultural background. According to Bae and Clark, “The language and culture of different ethnic groups is unique, and educators should respond to that uniqueness with mutual respect” (2005, p. 49).

## Multicultural Adaptations of Lessons

According to Krashen and Terrell (2000), one of the ways teachers break down barriers in the classroom is by lowering the affective filter, making students more comfortable and less intimidated. Teachers can do this by creating lessons that match students' ways of learning and communication and give students opportunities to affirm and honor their own culture (Black, 2006). According to Gollnick and Chinn, “A multiethnic curriculum permeates all subject areas at all levels of education, from pre-school through adult education” (2006, p. 107).

Classroom learning that is integrated, interdisciplinary, and student-centered should give students choices in how they will study and learn. By creating lessons that reflect students' cultures, teachers are

able to help students from different backgrounds improve their self-esteem, academic skills, values, and positive identity with their ethnic group. On the other hand, “if children receive negative feedback about how they look (race, appearance), how they behave (gender, culture), and how they demonstrate competence (ability, age), then it will be extremely difficult for them to feel positive about anyone else” (Hall, 1995, p. 2).

Teachers also need to be aware of both the academic and language needs of their students in their lessons. If a teacher is teaching math or science to English language learners, depending on the students’ English proficiency and their academic preparation, the teacher will focus more on either language or the academic subject. In every situation, the teacher must be aware that he or she is teaching both academic content and language. To engage students, teachers must give them meaningful, purposeful, comprehensible, and interesting content. If the students understand the concepts they are taught, teachers need not point out small errors in their English.

What is important is that all students be given equal opportunities to share their thoughts, experiences, and interests comfortably in the classroom. Research has shown that cooperative learning, which involves student participation in small-group learning activities that promote positive interactions, can be effective for students with different learning styles and at all academic levels. Real learning occurs when students are given meaningful tasks that attract and hold their interest and give them the opportunity to work cooperatively and collaboratively with peers from all walks of life.

## **Assessment in the Multicultural Classroom**

Assessment can help teachers understand what students know so that curriculum and classroom activities can be designed to increase their knowledge and skills, rather than sort students by levels of academic achievement. Teachers should be aware of cultural and language bias and not rely on test scores as the only indication of students’ intelligence and academic potential. Gollnick and Chinn strongly assert that “traditional multiple-choice tests should be replaced by performance assessment” (2006, p. 110).

These alternative assessments use observations, portfolios, and projects in different ways to demonstrate what students know. When appropriate, teachers should provide students from different cultural backgrounds with extra time, a paraprofessional or translator, or picture cues, while removing elements that reflect cultural bias. Moreover, teachers may want to allow their students from differing linguistic backgrounds to use their first language if necessary.

## **Parental Involvement**

Some teachers are afraid of being rejected by minority students and their parents due to ethnic differences. “Their parents might not accept me because I don’t know about their culture” (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005, p. 27). This common fear is created by having limited exposure to and experience in dealing with people from different backgrounds. To combat such fears, teachers should try to empathize with minority students and their families.

Teachers can “take time to imagine what it feels like to be one of a few African-American or Chinese in a white class” (Molland, 2004, p. 24), for example. By doing so, teachers can develop and maintain a positive perspective on culturally diverse students and their families, and as a result, feel more confident in meetings with parents to discuss hopes and aspirations for their child, what their child needs to succeed, and ways the school can help their child.

A teacher can communicate with parents in many ways, such as with newsletters, conferences, or home visits. If a teacher is not able to communicate with parents who have limited English competency, or parents do not feel comfortable with the parent-teacher conference, he/she can invite them to school for more public events. For example, cultural festivals with food and dance representing different countries might be a great tool for teachers to bring in hesitant parents.

A teacher can also ask parents to help create bulletin boards with pictures or artifacts from different cultures and celebrate all the diverse families within the community. It is important for teachers to remember that “parents or community members from diverse cultural backgrounds or who have different cultural experiences can share valuable information

with them and their students, fostering better mutual understanding” (Bae & Clark, 2005, p. 50). By doing so, teachers can “engage parents as resources in multicultural projects so that they feel they are part of the solution” (Escobar-Ortloff & Ortloff, 2003, p. 261) and give them a feeling of entitlement and empowerment. As education is team work, teachers should invite individual parents as well as community members to promote genuine understanding of their “real-life.”

## Teacher Experiences

Creating a student-centered classroom is one of the most important keys to creating a successful learning environment where diverse groups of students are fully engaged. As each child’s interests, strengths, and prior experiences are different, a teacher needs to prepare lessons that leave some flexibility for students to choose what interests them and the manner in which they will study and learn a topic. According to Gollnick and Chinn, this is one of the best ways to make subject matter more interesting for multicultural students.

Sarah, a pre-service teacher who worked in a multicultural setting, said, “I mostly worked with students from Mexico and they enjoyed reading different culture books.” Amanda also found reading and discussing stories from different cultures to be very effective in getting students interested in the curriculum and engaged in schoolwork:

When I did a unit on persuasion with my 8<sup>th</sup> grade mainstream and two ESOL students, I started off with a chapter “Inside Out” by Francisco Jimenez. I used the content of the chapter as a springboard to discuss whether or not languages other than English should be allowed in schools. Then I led students on to writing a persuasive letter about something in their school or community. Readings that represent multicultural settings help to show the students a better overall picture of the community rather than just their culture. Through this brief chapter they saw a glimpse into Francisco’s life.

I initially chose this selection with two Spanish speaking ESL students in mind. We read the chapter in English with the whole class. I thought it was a great opportunity to represent a piece of their culture into the curriculum. These students were in one of the four eighth grade classes. However, after I was surprised at how well students responded to the text and made connections between the culture in the chapter and to their own lives. It even went better than I expected. The class that got into the discussion about the English Only topic the most was not even the class with the ESL students. Students in another block drew out a vast amount of prior experiences that I never would have imagined. They were able to share their thoughts in order to

make connections between the mainstream culture and the culture in the book and relate it back to the topic of discussion.

In the same class we started off the year with a book called Seedfolks that represented a wide variety of cultures living together with a common connection. In a different unit, the students had to examine different myths, legends, folk tales and fables with a variety of themes. This naturally brought up how different cultures view common topics. Multiculturalism was integrated into the class in a variety of ways such as these. Some were subtle, whereas in others we talked about culture in a more concrete manner.

It is easy for teachers to expect autonomy in the classroom because the majority are part of the dominant group. They may lack exposure to minorities and have unrecognized biases in their teaching. Self-monitoring helps teachers work with their students and become more aware of their own prejudices. Also, teachers need to be cognizant of the potential to fall back into the dominant culture’s ways. By remaining aware, teachers can better help all students from different cultural backgrounds.

*alternative assessments use observations, portfolios, and projects in different ways to demonstrate what students know*

## Conclusion

Many teachers do not know how to work with multicultural students in their classrooms. We still see teachers practicing traditional methods and holding onto stereotypes that have a negative effect on students' success. For teachers to break down stereotypes, they should look at students not only as being from different cultures, but also as individuals with different learning styles. It is important to bring students' prior background knowledge and experiences into lessons and cooperative learning activities so that they feel engaged and interested in what is being taught. Students must also be in an environment where they feel safe and are able to express themselves with ease. Portfolios, observations, projects and other accommodations will be better indicators of student achievement than standardized tests.

Including parents in school activities is vitally important because parents want to see their children succeed in school and to be part of that success. Parents can be a valuable resource for the teacher and students. Finally, teachers need to reflect on their teaching practices in order to see if they are treating the students fairly and meeting their students' individual needs. All of these tactics can help teachers to be more effective and feel more comfortable in multicultural classrooms. By making learning experiences student-centered and relative to students from all backgrounds, teachers create a learning experience that will benefit all students.

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# Language Problems Facing Omani Learners of English

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English is important in the Sultanate of Oman for acquiring science and technology, conducting business, traveling to English-speaking and non-Arabic speaking countries, analyzing and understanding culture (reading, watching films and other programs, listening to pop music, and surfing the Internet), and finding white-collar jobs. Over 250 Omani students are yearly awarded fully- or partially-sponsored scholarships by the Omani government to study for their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in English-speaking countries (Al-Issa, 2006). These students will subsequently contribute to the nation-building of Oman.

Prior to embarking on their program of specialization, many of these students enroll in an intensive English as Second Language (ESL) improvement course in an English speaking country for six to twelve months, which may cost between \$10,000 and \$15,000. These courses are taught by native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), who often have little or no knowledge about the cultural, academic, and linguistic backgrounds of the Omani students.

This paper discusses the problem of Omani students' lack of communicative competence after nine years of EFL school-based learning. It investigates the causes leading to this problem and suggests ways that ESL instructors in English-speaking countries can cope. The aim is to enlighten NESTs about the cultural background and educational needs of these students, which in turn should have a positive effect on both the teachers' performance and the students' achievement.

## **The Problems**

When students in Oman exit high school, they generally encounter problems with using English

communicatively (Al-Issa, 2005a). They lack grammatical competence (how to use the structure and form of the language), discourse competence (how to provide cohesion and coherence across sentences and utterances), sociolinguistic competence (how to interact), and strategic competence (how to make the most of the language you have, especially when it is deficient) (Hymes, 1972). Omani students are exposed to substantial teaching of grammar rules, so grammatical competence is their least problematic area.

The four primary causes of students' lack of communicative ability are the national textbook; the transmission-based education system; the lack of educational aids, especially technology, in the EFL classrooms; and the paucity of time given to English in the national curriculum.

It is worth mentioning that these problems are not exclusive to Omani learners. Other Arab learners in contexts where English is another school subject, a foreign language, in the national curriculum encounter the same problems (Rabab'ah, 2005). This is particularly the case in the neighboring Arab countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC): Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

## **The National Textbook: Communication in *OWTE***

Al-Battashy (1989) and Al-Toubi (1998) state that English is not taught as a language for communication in Oman. They note that the classroom materials, especially the prescribed text *Our World Through English (OWTE, 1999-2000)*, and classroom activities are controlled and do not resemble real language use. Saur and Saur (2001) point out

that the kind of English taught and evaluated in secondary school is different from the kind of English the students need for entry to an English-medium college or university, and Al-Alawi (1997) also notes that it has little connection with the real world.

The ESL teacher needs to be aware that Omani students do not get much practice in integrating skills and communicating naturally. Al-Toubi (1998) found that the skills in *OWTE* are not integrated, and learners in the Omani English classroom are not given opportunities to express themselves. He further found that *OWTE* does not provide sufficient room for spoken language practice. *OWTE* fails to deal with language as a “social process, taking place in a social environment” (Pande, 2004, p. 4). Al-Toubi concludes that the Omani English language teaching curriculum fails to prepare the students for accurate, effective, and appropriate oral communication in English due to a lack of a variety in real speaking activities.

When it comes to written expression, the ESL instructor should also be aware that Omani students lack opportunities to communicate freely in writing. Students dwell on a single topic from the textbook, listening to a text about it, reading about it, speaking about it, and eventually writing about it. In general, students think about and produce language in a linear and controlled manner. The topics in *OWTE* are seldom based on the outward-bound students’ needs and interests. Therefore, students may have little interest in expressing themselves in the Omani classroom.

## Culture in *OWTE*

Al-Toubi (1998) and Al-Issa (2005b) found that the current national syllabus lacks a variety of authentic practice activities and materials and focuses heavily on the local culture and environment. This is despite the fact that the literature emphasizes the vital role of the culture of the L2 in positively impacting second language acquisition and developing communicative competence (Byram & Risager, 1999; Tang, 1999) and critical thinking (Ghosen, 2002).

*OWTE* contains simplified listening tasks, a few songs, and rhymes on the accompanying tapes.

These attempt to stress certain lexical and structural aspects of the lesson or topic introduced. The listening segments, spoken by native speakers, are primarily for the students to use in modeling their pronunciation (Al-Issa, 2002). In this way, *OWTE* narrows the focus of listening activities and does not expose students to a range of authentic materials, spoken by native speakers, to be listened to for a variety of purposes. Moreover, the students listen to the textbook’s language more through the carefully controlled presentation of the non-native English speaking teacher, while lacking exposure to authentic materials that provide “naturalistic samples” (Nunan, Tyacke & Walton, 1987) of contextualized language and facilitate second language acquisition.

Teachers are required to finish teaching *OWTE* in a prescribed amount of time as the end-of-semester exams are to a large extent based upon it: “It is

important ... that you complete the syllabus as this is what you test” (*Teacher’s Guide: Elementary Level*, 1997-98). *OWTE* is not accompanied by any

material appearing either in a hard copy form or as software to facilitate independent learning and varied exposure to the target language and to its culture in context. Teachers are invited to supplement *OWTE* in case they finish teaching it ahead of time. It is noteworthy that *OWTE* is structured so that the teacher will finish the content by the end of the academic year.

## Transmission-Based System

Omani students generally show a high level of awareness about the importance of English for their future (Al-Issa, 2005b). However, knowledge-based tests, mastery of content, and achievement grades dominate the scene and powerfully affect student motivation, contributing directly to their poor level of competent performance in English (Al-Toubi, 1998, Al-Issa, 2005a).

Learning through rote memorization is seen as generally one of the weaknesses of the educational system in Oman (Nunan et al., 1987; Al-Toubi, 1998; Al-Issa, 2005a). In Oman, exams are based on memorization and include a component that tests the four skills, grammar, and vocabulary independently.

*knowledge-based tests, mastery of content, and achievement grades dominate the scene and powerfully affect student motivation*

Babrakzai (2001) believes that this fragmented approach fails to “reflect the nature and functions of language in acquiring knowledge” (p. 21) as language is “not learned in small components” (p. 21). Al-Toubi, (1998) and Al-Issa (2005a) found that exams in Oman encourage and demand a considerable amount of memorization and production of information in huge amounts, while at the same time ignoring fluency.

Babrakzai (2001) writes that Omani students who enter English medium universities possess very limited ability to use English functionally for two main reasons. First, students forget what they have memorized at school. Secondly, knowledge in the textbook is transmitted to the students in a linear style, making retention more difficult.

Al-Alawi (1994) criticizes the education system in the Arab world, of which Oman is a part, and describes it as “authoritative.” The curriculum is implemented in a top-down mode, which makes it very difficult for teachers to engage in any kind of change or innovation (Al-Toubi, 1998). Al-Balushi (1999, p. 4) writes that “teaching methodology still tends to be very formal and emphasizes a largely passive role for students with an emphasis on rote learning.” Omani students encounter problems with thinking critically and analytically due to the structure of the system and its underlying philosophy and practices (Al-Issa, 2005a).

## **Educational Technology**

Al-Balushi (1999) writes that there is inadequate use of educational technology in the Omani schools in general. A typical Omani classroom includes a blackboard, chalk, tables, and chairs. Teachers are given a tape-recorder to play the listening texts recorded on the accompanying tapes. Schools rarely have computer or language labs. School libraries include very few English books and readers. Schools are not equipped with technological items such as overhead projectors, monitors, DVD players, or videos. In the principal’s office there is usually one (small) photocopying machine, which is used exclusively by the school administration.

Al-Barwani et al. (1997) found that at Sultan Qaboos University, the only state-owned university in the Sultanate, 79.33% of the 243 graduate teachers complained about the inadequate and insufficient resources and facilities allocated to teaching.

## **ELT Time**

Lightbown (2000) writes that “the most important reason for incomplete acquisition in foreign language classroom settings is probably the lack of time available for contact with the language” (p. 449). Nunan et al. (1987) point out that students need a minimum of 4,000 hours of instruction to reach proficiency in a second language. Students in Omani public schools, however, receive under 700 hours of formal English language instruction throughout the nine years they spend at school.

## **Suggested Solutions**

This section suggests solutions to the problems associated with the four language competencies.

### **Grammatical Competence**

Omani and GCCC students spend a considerable amount of their time studying grammar out of context and in isolated sentences in teacher-fronted instruction situations. The teachers themselves were taught through the grammar translation or audio-lingual method. Students in Oman and other Arab countries are hardly, if ever, given opportunities to explore grammatical structures in context “to see how and why alternative forms exist to express different communicative meanings” (Nunan, 1998, p. 102-3).

Savignon (2002) writes that “for the development of communicative ability, research findings overwhelmingly support the integration of form-focused exercises with meaning-focused experience” (p. 7). Savignon also believes that “grammar is important; and learners seem to focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative needs and experiences” (p. 7). Moreover, Celce-Murcia (1992) and Nunan (1998) assert that grammar instruction is more effective if it is discourse-based and content-based than if it is sentence-based and context-free.

Students can be engaged in meaningful activities like grammar games, for instance, which are fun and require manipulation and creativity. Such activities deter the students from using grammar mechanically and from considering grammar “as a static system of arbitrary rules” (Larsen-Freeman, 1997). Grammar should be primarily viewed as a component of listening, reading, speaking, and writing tasks,

rather than as a separate skill (Ramirez, 1995). Chen (1999) thus writes that grammar “must be taught in a manner that is consistent with grammar’s new role [and] not be taught as if it were the language per se” (p. 5).

Therefore, teachers should be concerned with designing meaningful tasks with a true interactional component to promote successful language learning (LeLoup & Ponterio, 2003). Such tasks can involve, for instance, solving a problem, making a video, preparing a presentation, or drawing up a plan (National Capital Language Resource Center, 2004b).

Furthermore, “students should be given opportunities to figure out everything by themselves, receiving help only when necessary” as they “tend to prefer assignments that allow them to explore the language.” This is because “the knowledge they obtain becomes theirs and it is often much easier to remember” (Sysoyev, 1999). Such “language exploration” can be best achieved through using authentic texts, which expose learners to various items and forms operating in the real world (Nunan, 1998), since “the grammatical items being taught are encountered in a range of different linguistic and experiential contexts” (Nunan, 1998, p. 108).

Educational technology not only contributes to varying channels of language contact, but also allows more time outside the class for students to come into contact with the target language through working independently while relying less on the teacher (Al-Issa, 2002).

### **Discourse competence**

Like any language, English has its own unique language patterns, which the Omani and GCCC learners need to be able to understand and apply efficiently. Otherwise, they will face difficulties making themselves understood. Demo (2001) says that learners should be trained to become discourse analysts. He suggests a four-step technique to maximize second language learners’ exposure to discourse in English. In step one, the teacher videos

or audiotapes a pair of native speakers engaging in a conversation in a social event, for instance. In step two the teacher plays the tape for the students and has them identify patterns of recorded linguistic behavior. Step three is associated with transcribing the conversation so that students can count the particular target tokens and examine their placement within the discourse. In step four the teacher gets the students to analyze specific discourse features individually in pairs or in small groups.

Demo (2001) suggests that the same data, which can be collected by the students themselves, can be “repeatedly examined for other conversational features” and “compared to discourse features found in other speech events” (p. 6). Demo believes that “this discourse approach to language learning removes language from the confines of textbooks and makes it tangible, so that students can explore language as interaction rather than as grammatical units” (p. 6). Also, these activities can be used by the teacher to “raise students’ awareness of language variation, dialect differences, and cultural diversity” (Demo, p. 6).

*The teachers’ role is important in raising students’ awareness about taking individual responsibility for this part of the language learning process*

### **Sociolinguistic competence**

Exposing students to authentic texts also contributes to the students’ listening comprehension development (Richards, 1983), which is an integral part of the overall development of the students’ sociolinguistic competence. Yet, teachers in English-speaking countries should not rely on the fact that their students are immersed in an English-speaking culture to assume that their Omani and GCCC students will develop sociolinguistic competence. Students need to be made aware of how to find and use authentic texts and understand that, as adults, they should be responsible for developing this important aspect of their overall communicative competence (Broersma, 2004).

The teachers’ role is important in raising students’ awareness about taking individual responsibility for this part of the language learning process and developing meaningful relationships with members of the target culture. Second language acquisition goes beyond oral and written language produc-

tion and involves gestures and body movements, too, such as handshaking, patting on the shoulder, and so forth. By observing such things, second language learners can discover a great deal about the interactive process in the target language (Broersma, 2004).

Broersma (2004) suggests that keeping journals to record questions, problems, and discoveries helps students develop sociolinguistic competence. Students can make note of any language features that cause trouble or frustration to them during communication and ask their teacher or any significant native speakers in their lives to help clarify such points.

In this vein, teachers need to expose their students to as many speech acts as possible, as speech acts are genuine examples of authentic language in context. Such speech acts complement the everyday English that students come across outside the institution

boundaries, and hence promote the practice of the language skills they are learning (Broersma, 2004).

*roleplays, simulations, and drama engage students in different social roles and speech events*

Moreover, Kasper (1997) and Olshtain and Cohen (1991) point out that activities such as roleplays, simulations, and drama engage students in different social roles and speech events. These activities provide opportunities to practice the wide range of pragmatic and sociolinguistic abilities that students need in interpersonal encounters outside the classroom.

### **Pragmatic competence**

Communication is complex and grounded in the culture and entails verbal and nonverbal strategies. It is necessary for the students to acquire such strategies where language is manipulated to meet communicative goals. Anisimova points out that “the acquisition of styles and registers is a very important factor in strategic competence for second language learners” (Anisimova, n.d., n.p.). According to Anisimova:

Successful interactional communication requires knowledge of slang, jargon, jokes, folklore, cultural aspects, politeness and formality, expectations, and other clues to social exchange. The personal function allows a speaker to express feelings, emotions, personality. (n.p.)

Rababa’ah (2005) believes that it is important to raise the students’ consciousness about the importance of strategic competence. Students need to know that the use of the time-gaining devices that native speakers themselves employ, such as “you know,” “you see,” “do you see what I mean?” and “what do you call this?” and other such strategies “is not an indication of communication failure [but] it can be very successful in compensating for the lack of linguistic knowledge, and they can help the English language learners solve their communication problems and achieve their communicative goals” (Rabab’ah, 2005, p. 194).

While native speakers’ strategic competence is tacit or implicit, and cannot be described (Kasper, 1997), English as a second language learners, according to Kasper, acquire such knowledge through out-of-class observation or watching audiovisual media.

Kasper states that out-of-class observation or watching audiovisual media is not for the students to “imitate native speakers’ action

patterns but in order to build their own pragmatic knowledge of the right kind of input” (n.p.). This means that the teacher plays an essential role in selecting appropriate authentic input.

“Appropriate” here also refers to having culturally sensitive input and materials. ESL instructors must be acutely aware that audiovisual media should not include scenes that conflict with the Muslim and Arab culture and traditions which are considered outrageous by Arabs in general and Muslims in particular. Be especially careful to exclude scenes of nudity or of a man and a woman kissing, or the use of socially offensive and unacceptable words. Muslims can be quite upset when they hear or read disparaging references to religion or God. It cannot be overemphasized that Omani and GCCC students are very conservative and can be easily offended.

### **Conclusion**

Omani and GCCC students find themselves communicatively incompetent in the English language when they exit high school in their respective countries and travel to English-speaking countries to pursue their first degree studies. The discussion in the

first part of the paper revealed that this is mainly due to the rigidly controlled, transmission-based, and textbook and exam-oriented system these students experience prior to embarking on their university programs. Language in such a system is taught for its own sake and is hardly, if ever, used as an effective tool for achieving anything other than passing exams. This has subsequently led most of these learners to treat English as another fact-based school subject and a hurdle to overcome (Al-Issa, 2005a).

NESTs teaching Omani and GCCC students in English-speaking countries will need to help these students change their learning and thinking habits and become more responsible for their own language learning and acquisition. NESTs should adopt and implement an approach to ELT that dynamically and constantly varies the channels and levels of exposure to the language and provides and creates opportunities for the students to use the language in an interactive, meaningful, challenging, creative, dynamic, and interesting way.

“Students’ motivation for learning increases when they see connections between what they do in the classroom and what they hope to do with the language in the future” (National Capital Language Resource Center, 2004a). Their attention increases when classroom activities are relevant to their interests and when different resources are carefully applied. Numerous articles have been written about the role of technology in education. Computers and the Internet are especially good in enhancing second language learners’ motivation, sense of achievement, and communicative competence by exposing learners to rich, authentic, and contextualized language beyond what is presented in the classroom (see <http://www.iteslj.org/Articles> and <http://hkjtefl.org/>).

Better teaching in turn can impact these students’ attitudes towards the complexity of second/foreign language learning and acquisition and the uses and values of the world’s first international language. With more motivation, such students will gradually make the necessary mental effort to reflect on their own language learning, explore the language, and use it for analytical and critical purposes.

After all, the aim behind learning English is to help these students use the language for acquiring science and technology to successfully contribute to building their nations. When they return to their

respective countries, they will enter a demanding and competitive job market. Competence in English in this market is a prerequisite for finding a white-collar job. However, science and technology cannot be acquired if language is not acquired and used effectively in the first place.

Learning English for everyday communication and interaction and for cultural analysis and understanding are two very important (personal) purposes for learning English worldwide today. Learning English for these two purposes contributes to these students’ ability to vary their exposure to and practice of English. It also helps them to gain the necessary confidence in understanding and using the language and to see it as serving significant multiple purposes.

Like students worldwide, Omani students bring to the language classroom different social, psychological, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, experiences, philosophies, expectations, perceptions and hidden agendas (Al-Issa, 2002). Hence, it behooves NESTs to explore and understand these differences. NEST should also strive to understand the different aims such students bring to the foreign or second language classroom and to help them achieve these aims in the best possible ways.

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# No Culture Left Behind: Reaching the Purepecha Indigenous People

*Barbara Swanson, Wilkes Elementary*

*Katharine Ballash, Woodland Elementary*

*Michelle Kosthas, Alder Elementary*

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Many K-12 educators wonder why some of their students from Mexico are having more difficulty than other students in learning to articulate English sounds, read, and write. With many of these students, strategies successful with other English language learners from Mexico just don't work. Educators

from the Reynolds School District (RSD) in Fairview, Oregon researched this issue over a five-year period.

They discovered there were over 100 Purepecha (sometimes referred to as Tarasco) families from Michoacan living in their attendance area. For these students, Spanish is their second language, and English is their third. After pursuing extensive Internet information and contacts, a team of three from RSD traveled to Michoacan to do on-site field research. Time spent in the villages their students came from made it abundantly clear that the learning challenges were as much or more rooted in cultural and literacy issues as in the fact that English was the students' third language. Most importantly, they confirmed that the problem was neither an indigenous student nor a Purepecha learning problem; it was a teaching problem. Teachers tend to treat all students from Mexico as if they share a common cultural background, unaware of the substantial cultural differences within that country.

Clearly, the quest for better teaching methods has just begun for those working with indigenous peoples in general and with the Purepecha in particular. More insight is needed so that more practical methods can be developed. The authors are passionate about networking with others who are learning how to better support the learning process of all indigenous students and in particular, the Purepecha. We soon hope to have a website on the Purepecha that will be of value to educators in the US.

*Barbara Swanson, Katharine Ballash, and Michelle Kost are teachers in Reynolds School District in Portland, Oregon. [Ed. note: See their bios on the website.]*



*Figure 1. Mural by Diego Rivera, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City. Photo by Deborah Healey.*

# Teaching Tips

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## Voice e-mail

*John Sparks  
Portland Community College*

In the many years that I have been teaching speaking courses, I have progressed from getting students to talk one-on-one to recordings on audio-cassette to voice mail messages on my telephone to the new gadget on the block: voice e-mail. Horizon Wimba (<http://www.horizonwimba.com>) offers Voice Tools, which may be used in a variety of situations, such as in online courses, through WebCT, as a link on a web site, podcasting, etc. I don't teach distance learning classes, so my main application of this tool is as voice e-mail. Students access the voice e-mail application through a link on my web site, already automatically configured to send to my e-mail address. They may record their voice at a computer station through a microphone, listen to their own message, and then send or re-record depending on whether they are satisfied or not.

I use voice e-mail in different ways. The first is to ask students to read assigned passages aloud. I mark up the printed transcript as I listen, using phonetic symbols and notations for intonation, linking, stress, and pausing. The second type of assignment is a student-generated narrative, such as an elaborate, humorous excuse for missing class, usually targeting a grammar topic, such as past tense. I write down comments about pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and content on a score sheet as I listen. Students bring these notations and comments when we have a class session in the language lab. They understand what to focus on and can select the appropriate practice exercises in the lab's pronunciation program.

A second application of the tool is voice authoring, which allows an instructor to record a passage, such as a lecture or a set of instructions, for students to listen and respond to by voice e-mail.

Instructors can also leave audio links on a web page using this tool. Voice discussion, which allows streams of dialog, is another feature of the program.

Voice e-mail has several advantages over the methods I used before. I can store student voice e-mails in a folder in my e-mail until I want to listen to them, and I can pause, begin again, or listen again whenever I want to. This takes care of one of the most serious problems I had with telephone voice mail: the frequent interruptions I had, both at home and in my office, while listening to student recordings. Students find the application easy to use. Our language lab computers are all equipped with headphones, but it only costs about \$20 for a cheap headphone set for home use. Access is easy, either through a link on a web page or through WebCT. Best of all, voice e-mail definitely relegates to the distant past those experiences carting around tote bags of audiocassette tapes that would spill out and dismember themselves at the slightest provocation.

A major issue is the cost of a site license. Horizon Wimba allows institutions to "try out" the program for a limited time, such as one year. A site license ends up being based on an institution's FTE, however, so the larger you are, the more you will have to pay, and it can cost thousands of dollars. The trick will be to get faculty outside language departments, and especially in distance learning, to get interested in a new dimension to their craft.

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# Lights, camera, pronunciation!

*Char Heitman*

*University of Oregon*

Teachers often assume (or at least hope) that learners will attend to those features of the target language that will enable them to improve their language skills. However, given the flood of different stimuli, it can be difficult for learners to discriminate between what they should attend to and what they can tune out. Teachers can help by bringing key features to students' attention. In my pronunciation classes, in addition to oral practice of segmentals and supra-segmentals, I provide activities to help students learn to hear patterns in the speech around them. Listening for features such as word stress, intonation, linking, and reductions can provide a model for students to imitate and reinforce the concepts covered in class, as well as help them acquire skills for making continued progress after the course is over.

The most obvious way to study speech patterns is through video. However, students will rarely hear key features unless their attention has been drawn to them via explicit instruction. Since many students watch TV and movies as a means to learn language, this exercise helps students use audiovisual media more effectively for language acquisition on their own. Ideally, students will also learn to listen for these features in the conversations they hear in daily life. Students have reported orally or via journals that consciousness-raising activities such as these have helped them pay attention to language features of which they were previously unaware.

The following activity can be used in pronunciation or oral skills classes to help students listen for the patterns and features of spoken language.

- 1) Review the features of the speech pattern to be listened for in the film clip. For example, after discussing intonation, I present a clip in which students listen for examples of rising and falling intonation. They see the use of falling intonation for statements and wh-questions and of rising

intonation for yes/no questions, to indicate surprise, and to ask for repetition of a wh-question or statement.

- 2) Play the video clip several times, having students listen for meaning. Discuss the content of the segment, clarifying any questions or confusion students may have about the meaning.
- 3) Distribute a transcript of the video clip and have students mark each sentence or phrase, predicting which kind of intonation will be used (rising or falling) and which word will receive the most stress (where the intonation will most dramatically rise or fall).
- 4) In pairs, have students compare their predictions.
- 5) Play the video clip again (several times as necessary), having students mark their transcripts and make corrections to their original predictions.
- 6) Go over the answers as a whole class.
- 7) Have students practice and perform the dialogue as an optional additional activity.
- 8) Play the clip again for students to hear the features.

It works best to use clips in which the language is not too rapidly paced, especially for lower-level students, and in which the features are more pronounced. Some sources of clips I have used include soap operas, "Sleepless in Seattle," "Father of the Bride," "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," and "Friends." Another source is the Internet. Many of the clips tend to be monologues, which is fine for teaching different features. This method can also be used to help students hear reductions such as *wanna*, *gonna*, *hafta*, *hasta*, *gotta*, etc.; word stress; stressing contrasting information; linking; thought groups; rhythm; and other speech features.

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# Using learner-generated materials to personalize learning

*Tom Delaney*  
*University of Oregon*

When approaching a teacher's office, one is frequently greeted by the sound of the teacher tapping away on the keyboard making materials for class. Unquestionably, creating materials is an important part of teachers' work. Although having a handout can give teachers a sense of satisfaction or security, we sometimes do go overboard with materials creation. This may be true even in cases where learner-generated materials would suffice, or even be more effective than teacher-generated materials. The following lesson plan gives one example of how to replace a standard ESL/EFL lesson with a new and improved "paperless" lesson.

Giving learners a map of a city and having them practice giving and receiving directions is a common ESL/EFL task. However, asking people to talk about places they've never seen is less meaningful to them than talking about a place they know very well: their own neighborhood. The procedure for such a lesson might look something like this:

1. The teacher draws a simple map of his/her neighborhood on the chalkboard. Be sure to provide a starting point, such as a bus stop or store, as well as five or six unlabelled "mystery" buildings or locations. One of them could be the teacher's home. The learners copy the map on a piece of paper.
2. The teacher guides the class through his/her neighborhood using the target language forms (for example, "Go straight to the corner. The building on your left is the supermarket."). The learners listen and label the mystery locations.
3. The learners confer and check their maps with a partner. If necessary, they can ask the teacher questions such as "Where is the supermarket?" or "Is the supermarket on the right side of the street or the left?"
4. The class debriefs, with the teacher asking them "Where is the supermarket?" and getting them to respond with appropriate explanations. For lower level classes, the teacher could simply point and ask, "What is this building?"
5. The learners draw simple maps of their neighborhoods following the same guidelines as for the teacher's map. A five-minute time limit is helpful.
6. Partners take turns describing their neighborhoods to each other and labeling the mystery locations. Again, encourage learners to ask their partners questions if they have not understood something.
7. Finally, learners check their understanding with their partners by asking questions such as "The park is next to the swimming pool, right?"

Although this lesson focuses on speaking and listening, it would be easy to add a reading and writing component by, for example, asking students to write a paragraph describing their neighborhood (or what they like or do not like about it). They could then exchange papers and read and summarize a partner's composition.

The range of topics for which teachers could create lessons using these types of tasks is only limited by one's imagination. Although the teacher still needs to have a well thought out plan, using lessons like this requires less time on the computer, takes less paper, and involves students in genuinely meaningful use of the target language. These lessons exploit one very basic principle: People generally like to talk about themselves and their lives.

*Tom Delaney is a core Instructor in the American English Institute at the University of Oregon. He has taught EFL in Japan, Korea, Turkey, and Colombia and is working on a doctoral degree in applied linguistics.*

# Reading with the Left Brain or the Right?

*Marna Broekhoff*  
*University of Oregon*

We all know the frustration of a class discussion that falls flat because no one has done the assigned reading. Reluctantly acknowledging the huge correlation between accountability and student performance, we resort to pop quizzes, comprehension tests, written answers to discussion questions, and other accountability “stimulators.” Such assessments, though, are unexciting at best, and punitive at worst.

There’s certainly a place for discussion questions about the thematic elements in a reading, as well as about structural and rhetorical issues. The left-brain, critical and analytic thinking that such discussion requires is essential in developing reading skills. However, for a change of pace welcome to both teacher and student alike, you may want to consider some right-brain activities, such role plays of themes in the assigned readings.

I tried role plays twice for the first time this fall in AEIS Writing 110, the first writing course for matriculated international students at the University of Oregon. I got the idea from my colleague, Belinda Young-Davy. For the second and third essays in this course, students were given short readings about family and personal relationships. Their writing assignment was to choose a theme from a reading and relate it to their own experience. Themes included arranged marriage, cultural identity and shame, parent-child relationships, poverty and education, and levels of friends.

After we had finished the usual class discussion questions, I divided students into groups and asked them to choose a story and prepare a five-minute role play about a theme from that story. The first time I allowed them to portray a theme by recreating part of the story. The second time, I asked them to choose a theme and apply it to new characters and a new setting. Their role play could involve a similar situation, problem, or solution to a problem. As each group performed, the rest of the class guessed which story and which theme were portrayed. For their second

role plays, I gave students a worksheet on which they could make notes about the characters, setting, plot, conflict, climax, conclusion, and important dialog.

Following the role plays, students evaluated their experience by responding to these questions:

- 1) Did the role playing give you any new insights about the story?
- 2) Did anything about your role play experience surprise you?
- 3) Did anything in the role plays you watched interest you?
- 4) Would you have preferred to write more in your journals and answer more discussion questions?

The majority of responses were positive, with comments that the role plays helped them understand the story and characters better, gain new insights into the theme and “meaning” of the story, understand other students’ viewpoints, solve conflicts in their journal writing about the story, and remember the story better. Several said that the activity was a fun social experience and new to them. Three out of fifteen, however, said they would have preferred more journal writing.

My own view is that along with providing a refreshing change of pace from the usual discussion questions, role plays encourage students to use their “right brains” while thinking creatively to synthesize a new whole. They accommodate different learning modalities, including the auditory and kinesthetic. They force the students to understand and internalize the themes of their reading. They make them active, rather than passive readers, who will remember their reading. Last but not least, the role plays are fun for everyone!

*Marna Broekhoff, from the University of Oregon’s American English Institute, has also taught in Japan, Turkey, and an Arizona prison. She has a Ph.D. in English and specializes in teaching writing.*

# Not Your Usual Final Project

*Lora Yasen*

*Tokyo International University*

The end of semester was looming and I wanted to finish classes on an exciting note. I didn't want the usual final exam for my advanced level American Studies: Religious Themes in Film content elective and accompanying Applied English class. I didn't think students would enjoy writing another essay either, so I decided to try a different sort of final assessment. This was a multi-level class of Japanese university students with TOEFL scores ranging from 440-500 studying in an intensive English program.

During the sixteen-week semester we watched eight films and discussed topics from many religions, myths, and philosophies. We studied free will in *Pleasantville*, enlightenment in *The Truman Show*, and the yin and yang in *The Matrix Trilogy*.

For the final project, I gave students many options. They could work individually, in pairs, or in small groups to analyze a film. Students needed to discuss a religious, philosophical, or other theme in the film, and make a summary and critique of the story. I also gave them the option of a writing project or a presentation project.

I required students who chose the writing project to produce a magazine-style "publication" consisting of several articles discussing the chosen topic using Microsoft Publisher's newsletter template. I required the students who chose the presentation project to use Microsoft PowerPoint and cover all of the same topics on their film.

Students had to include photos with references from the films either from the Internet or from movie screenshots. They also had to do Internet research at official movie sites and read about film themes in

Wikipedia online encyclopedia articles. I gave out a list of films with religious themes and gave students the option of choosing one of them or selecting a different film.

The students were excited to try out Publisher and PowerPoint and even more excited to learn how to add screenshots into their projects. I had to give them written instructions along with hands-on guidance on how to use Publisher and how to take screenshots from a movie.

Providing choices gave students the freedom to select a type of assignment in which they could excel. For example, students who were independent but shy could choose the individual newsletter writing project. Students who enjoyed speaking and working with others could give a presentation in a group.

The final projects were indeed different from the usual final exam. The results were colorful, and students added their own personal design styles to the work. Students learned new software and technical skills that they could incorporate into future projects as well. The class didn't seem to dread the last project as they might an exam and were motivated to do well. We posted the newsletters and presentation handouts on the bulletin boards for the class to enjoy and for an opportunity to provide peer feedback. Projects were graded for mastery of content for the elective course, and a rubric was used for grading English skills.

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