

# Western Teachers Cultural and Linguistic Challenges in Teaching English Language in the Classroom

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## Abstract

*English Language has become a global and required language across all fields around the World. With this demand on the language, more teachers and practitioners are involved in the teaching process. So many of them take the job of teaching English as a career to teach native and non-native speakers which is not an easy task and it is not problem free. Among the difficulties teachers face when they teach English are attitude, students' behavior, pronunciation and grammar to mention a few. This research paper reports on the cultural and linguistic challenges that Western faculty encounter when they teach English in an EFL context at Sultan Qaboos University. Data for this study were collected through a structured interview (written form) with western teachers in the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University. It is hoped that the findings of this paper will add to the EFL literature, offer and suggest some practical and pedagogical implications to western teachers teaching English as a foreign language. It is also important that by learning the results, both new and experienced teachers alike are going to be enlightened about how to tackle these barriers in the classroom and how to teach their students more effectively. Further, a greater attention and consideration should be directed to the development of classroom materials and effective selection of teaching strategies.*

## 1. Introduction

These days, English language has become the language of choice in most countries around the world. Being global and the language of the Internet 70%, it has required many people to take up teaching English language as a career [6].

It is believed that many foreign languages are difficult to learn; yet it is the English language as a foreign language that is the most difficult language to learn and teach [2].

Native and non- native teachers of English find the job of teaching English in an EFL context quite hard and challenging for many different obstacles. These can be student motivation, knowledge, low achievement, and dependence on rote learning

memorization, attitude, pronunciation and grammar [9].

Further, Western teachers struggle with a web of classroom difficulties like built-in expectations about teaching and learning outcomes, different classroom interactions and behaviors, discrepancies in classroom culture and communication difficulties [8].

There is a large body of literature that addresses the issue of the challenges that English Language teachers encounter in the teaching of English around the world in an ESL and EFL context generally and the Arab World specifically. To give an example, some of the published studies in the Arab World are the ones conducted in the United Arab Emirates in Zayed University by Sonleitner & Khelifa [8], tackling Western-Educated faculty challenges in a Gulf classroom. A similar study was done by McBride [5] on becoming more culturally aware in the University classroom: advice from a faculty member teaching in the Gulf Region in Zayed University. However, the concept of Western teachers' cultural and linguistic challenges in Oman is still not a well explored topic. This paper is going to serve the purpose of finding out more about the cultural and linguistic challenges and offer some pedagogical and practical recommendations for Western teachers, new and veteran alike, to overcome those difficulties.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Study Objectives

The main objectives of the study are twofold:

- To find out what cultural and linguistic problems or challenges western faculty encounter when teaching Omani or Arab students in the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University and
- To offer some practical guides and recommendations on how to overcome those challenges.

### 2.2. Setting

The study is carried out in the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University. The Language Centre is

a support and academic organization that is responsible for teaching English Language for all admitted students into Sultan Qaboos University (hereafter SQU). Also significant, more than 4000 students go through Foundation and Credit programmes each semester. Equally important, more than 200 instructors from 30 different countries help students to improve their language preparing them for English-medium courses in their subject areas (<http://www.squ.edu.om/tabid/1008/language/en-US/Default.aspx>).

### 2.3. Study Questions

The study investigates two major questions

- What are the cultural and linguistic challenges that Western teachers struggle with when they teach in the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University?
- What methods do Western teachers use to overcome those challenges?

### 2.4. Participants

The target population of the study is Western teachers teaching in the Language Centre. There are about 88 Western faculty hired in the Language Centre from different parts of the world like the US, the UK, Canada, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand. The actual subjects who responded to the question were 25 (22%). They were 15 males and 10 females. They all held position of either Senior Language Instructor or Assistant Language Lecturer and aged between 31 and 61 years old.

### 2.5. Research Tool

Data were obtained by conducting a structured, written form interview with Western teachers in the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University. A mail out questionnaire was sent to the participants to get their feedback.

## 3. Cultural Challenges

The following Extracts are taken from the participants responses. Some quotes are adjusted and modified to avoid repetition and for the sake of good presentation. They are then followed by the author's thoughts and personal reflections.

### 3.1. Using students' names Extracts (1-4)

1. *Uncertainty about using female students' names in a mixed classroom. Then a group of girls came to me and asked me to use their names.*
2. *Remembering names is not difficult but some names are difficult to pronounce, especially if the names have sounds not present in English. Some of them are unfamiliar and unusual.*
3. *High frequency of names makes it difficult to individuals with the same names (5 Ahmeds and 3 Mohammeds).*
4. *In my first semester, using names presented a significant challenge, based on two issues: First, I didn't know how to properly pronounce some of the names, and faced embarrassment when I made mistakes taking attendance. Second, I had to get used to the great number of names that were redundant – so I'd have to learn the father's name as well as their first name. Also, I'm still surprised after teaching here in Oman to encounter new names that I have never heard before.*

When respondents were asked this question on students' names, they responded differently but most of them asserted that it was "a significant challenge" for some of them. The major challenges lie in the difficulty of pronouncing students' names and the high frequency of some names makes it hard for them in a way that the teacher has to learn the second or the last name of the students for identification. McBride [5] suggests some strategies on how to tackle these challenges. Some of them are to ask seasoned faculty or experienced how to pronounce the names on the class list. Also, the teacher can invite students to correct him when mispronunciation occurs. Finally, name cards can be placed on students' desks, with their names on, to be easily identified.

### 3.2. Addressing students "girls" vs. "boys" Extracts (5-8)

5. *"Girls" seems ok, but "boys" seems infantile for young men, calling "boys" "men" does not seem right either. [B]est thing (young ladies and young men.*
6. *Separation of male and female in class is still something I find odd.*
7. *Gender has not affected teaching much, except that I designate same-gender groups. I don't wish to*

*be a trailblazer or alter the way things are traditionally done in Oman.*

8. *On occasion when we have to make decisions in the class I have to serve as the intermediary between them. What did seem awkward was having them call me "teacher," which sounded quite immature at first. Now, I understand why they do that, and also notice that call me, "Dr."*

According to McBride, calling female students as "girls" reinforces the notion that women have less influence in the society. As he believes that "girls" is an inappropriate label or address to be given to female students especially that some of them are married and with children. To my mind, it is not necessarily true or goes in line with the context here because most of these girls are young and they do not mind being called "girls".

As regards gender segregation, students are not expected to mix or mingle together as it is not culturally acceptable and appropriate for girls to work and interact with unrelated male figures. I will refer to Huff (2005) and his religious and cultural framework in the academic world. He suggests that religion and culture play a very significant role in shaping academia. They are just two elements that cannot be separated from each other.

### 3.3. Using Arabic in the Classroom Extract (9-23)

9. *I use Arabic in a very limited way with low levels, with high levels it is just for humor.*
10. *I use Arabic in the classroom occasionally. To use an "Omani" term (e.g. sanoor for cat) for fun. I make it clear that if the students want to communicate with me, they have to use English.*
11. *Sometimes I use an Arabic word or two. Students use Arabic sometimes but never in a way that interferes with the class objectives. Once or twice students have made comments in Arabic which I couldn't understand I was uncomfortable, as I didn't know the reason for the comment. Was it intentional rudeness?*
12. *So far never, as other students would translate comic effect.*
13. *I don't speak Arabic, have Arabic-English dictionary in my cell phone which can be useful at times.*
14. *I wish I could! It's great for very low levels and helpful with higher concepts.*
15. *If I use Arabic words the students like it.*

16. *I only use Arabic as a joke to make my students laugh and feel more at ease.*
17. *I think it is a great advantage to be able to use some Arabic words in the classroom. The students seem to really appreciate it when a western teacher makes an effort to learn some Arabic.*
18. *My Arabic is so poor. I am unable to detect and solve problems which are quite simple.*
19. *This is always a challenge. Students want to translate for each other because it eased them struggling to understand or actively engage in learning and practicing English.*
20. *I can't speak it. I use it if time is short and a direct translation is a good option. I ask a stranger student to tell the other in Arabic.*
21. *My Arabic is shamefully poor so my use of Arabic is not there, that said they do like it when I use my few words. Shows respect. Students' use of Arabic in class is of course not encouraged but sometimes useful for peer help or a clarification of a point.*
22. *Arabic is an asset in the classroom. It is far easier to translate if there is a one-for-one equivalent between the two languages, and with the lower levels in FPEL it is always easier to do "housekeeping" in Arabic, because that way the teacher can be certain that the instructions have been understood. Students appreciate expatriate teachers who can speak some Arabic; because that indicates that they care about the culture in which they are working. The only people who oppose the use of Arabic in the classroom are, in my experience, (a) cultural imperialists who have come to the middle East with a deficit model in their minds, (b) monolinguals who have no understanding of how they themselves would be enriched by the ability to speak another language and (c) neurotics who are convinced that their students are badmouthing them in a language they cannot understand.*
23. *I don't mind a certain amount of Arabic used among the students in the background, as long as it's "useful" or "sharing/teaching" kind of language - constructive.*

All the above assertions go in par with the fact that learning the mother tongue of the students serve in reducing the stress or anxiety experienced by students when learning the language. As it has been found in the respondents' answers is that using

students' language is an "asset" and "advantage" in the classroom. It is a strategy followed by some teachers to show "respect" and make students feel "at ease" and students "appreciate it".

McBride brings some examples of Arabic words and phrases that teachers use and students really appreciate are good morning (Sabah alkair), good afternoon (Massa alkair), Hello (Marhaba or alsalam aleikum). More phrase that also teachers code switch with their students are God Willing (Insha'allah) and Thanks be to God (al hamdullilah).

#### 4. Muslim and Omani Practices

##### 4.1. Ramadhan (Extracts 24-32)

24. *It can be a problem when students fast if you have classes at end of day, students have less energy.*
25. *Difficult for students (tired, hungry brain not working properly) little motivation during this period.*
26. *As I am not a Muslim, I do not realize Islamic rituals. Students are free to perform Islamic/Omani traditions but where possible it should not take toll on class time.*
27. *I fast also to be in tune with students energy levels. (If I can do this, you can too) is a better approach than simply "cracking the whip".*
28. *I don't struggle with Ramadan, but my students seem to want me to bend all manner of class practices to fit within it: start time, stop time, homework and tiredness.*
29. *I have to remember not to drink water in front of fasting students and I take extra care dress in Ramadan.*
30. *Great for cross-cultural comparisons and the students are always proud to speak about it.*
31. *Religion came up a few times, always from a student always wanting the teacher to become a Muslim Each term some books were always left on teacher's desk which some welcomed, others found annoying, others ignored. A difficult area for some in another's country. As it would be anywhere else.*
32. *Not as much homework can be assigned. Homework is more time consuming to grade because it's not done carefully.*

The issue of Ramadan and fasting is not new in literature. However, it is crucially important for

western teachers to understand that students engage in the practice of fasting with positive attitude (Cited in McBride, 2004) and that these holy days of fasting go beyond self discipline into a deep spiritual meaning.

According to McBride, it is extremely important to be cognizant of the fact that students might not complain, yet they may feel weary. (2004)

##### 4.2. Dress Code (Extracts 33-36)

33. *Even though I dress in a covered, Muslim way, my clothing is less conservative by Omani students. I don't know about what my students' perspectives might be.*
34. *I take care to wear acceptable clothes and feel self-conscious if my clothes are not right. I can tell by the way students look at me.*
35. *I struggle with the Omani dress code. The ladies are constantly fiddling with their headscarves and obviously find the all-covering black gowns uncomfortable in hot weather.*
36. *Many of our female students are under the impression that the abaya [the cloak] is "traditional" when, in fact it is a relatively recent innovation. 30 years ago many women in Oman wore really traditional, brightly colored clothing because an abaya is totally impractical if you are working in the fields, herding goats, or foraging for wood. The abayas have now become a sign that a woman is not a farmers' wife, but it is in no way a problem. Teaching women who insisted on wearing the niqab [the veil] would, of course, be a nightmare, but to date that has never even been mooted.*

It is worth mentioning here that religion and cultural traditions are key issues in the academic world and that they play a very influencing role in shaping and controlling academia as stated by Taha-Thomure [10].

Interestingly Romanowski & Nasser [7] support the fact that teachers have to understand, justify and rationalize students' feelings and behaviors the teaching setting.

##### 4.3. Animals (talking about pigs and animals in general) (Extracts 37-45)

37. *Obviously a teacher has to do a lot of self-censoring when interacting with Arab/Muslim students. Otherwise, confusion will develop.*

38. *I avoid mentioning pigs unless it comes up in a text; usually talking about pets in general is not a problem.*
39. *Academic English does not lend itself to talking about animals. Class discussion usually stems from course content. If students themselves bring [it] up, then [it is] ok. Pigs is an odd area. I don't recall them being a topic of conversation anywhere among Westerners.*
40. *I avoid causing discomfort. We can talk about camels, donkeys or horses. So this is not a problem.*
41. *My students liked talking about animals. They also enjoyed discussing Halal practice for dealing with animals.*
42. *I don't mention pigs but I can't see why it is a problem to talk about them. They exist but Muslims just don't eat them.*
43. *Students don't have pets so a lot of Western materials are strange to them.*
44. *It can raise some interesting cross cultural areas of discussion. Pets [do] more than pigs.*
45. *Well, these are topics that I had to be aware of, but didn't cause any particular problems. I just have to keep it in mind.*

According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) discussed in Romanowski & Nasser (2010), the 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom state one of many points and that is teachers are unrestricted to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject and that they should be careful not to bring any controversial issues into their teaching environment.

#### **4.4. Examples of students' classroom behaviors that are colored by cultural influences (Extracts 46-51)**

46. *I have taught in many countries and in each location behavior, outlook and attitude is colored by local cultural, religious and family influences. However, with young people they are also (increasingly) open to more international influences too. They are far more knowing, for good and less good, than they were when I started out.*
47. *I think pretty much all the behavior is culturally influenced. The cultural pressure is so strong here that only the students who are educated abroad get a sense the something different even exists.*

48. *Grade negotiation, expectations of teachers because of prior secondary school experience- What it means to "help" students, lateness, [and] inability to be comfortable around the opposite sex.*
49. *10 years ago, Students behaviors/verbalized ideas were 100% colored by cultural influences. Today: more and more students are expressing individual ideas that don't necessarily coincide with their culture. When any student does it, more and more of them will start expressing their own ideas too.*
50. *Culture has an enormous influence in the way students learn and behave in the classroom. Although there are some commonalities between students on a higher educational level everywhere, I believe that it is safe to point out some of what I would call generalities about Omani students: They are*
- *Respectful*
  - *Warm and personable*
  - *Relational*
  - *Like to have a good time and laugh and joke around, both with each other and the instructor (appreciate humor)*
  - *Are quite "tribal" and look out for each others' interests*
  - *If some of the poorer students (boys) "don't get it," they have a tendency to "space out" and simply not engage in the learning process. They may not turn to the proper page in the textbook, and work on answering the questions, for example. So, I have to stay alert for such problems.*
  - *Have specific routines they go through when they greet each other (i.e. shaking hands, etc.) Or: Knocking on the door before they come into the classroom late!*
  - *The girls seem to be more competitive and harder-working than the boys, in general terms.*
  - *Girls tend to be more "restrained" and not as eager to speak-up or stand-out. They do enjoy being smart, and smarter than the boys*
  - *They seem to be very defensive and aware of their "territory" in the classroom, and make sure they're not affected by the boys' presence.*
51. *Gender relation affects group dynamics. Omanis are very open and accepting and happy to explain differences. They are reluctant to tell you if you have made a cultural faux pas.*

I believe it is worth noting here that respecting local culture and understanding students' feelings are very crucial elements in the teaching practice for teachers to get their objectives achieved and their message communicated.

Sonleitner & Khelifa [8] stress the need for a "cross-cultural reflective practice where teaching methods and teacher assumptions and expectations about teaching and learning are filtered through the local culture setting.

#### **4.5. What methods do you use to address those cultural challenges? (Extracts 52-57)**

52. *As always with teaching it is about listening to the students, local teachers and those with a little more experience in the country. Some teachers who have been too long in a job or a country can be a little cynical.*
53. *I have learned over 6 years in Oman that I cannot be aggressive and demanding in my approach to discipline. Omanis respond well to a conciliatory approach. This has served me well and we are all much happier now. For me being informed of their culture and also that my opinions come from my culture as well has helped a ton because when it is something very culturally informed, I have to choose whether I want the battle or not. If you fight of the things that frustrate you in class that are from cultural issues you will lose your mind and your class. I have had to adjust what I expect teaching and Arab class; versus what I would expect teaching a class in America.*
54. *Be open minded. Don't sweat the small stuff. Talk [or] vent to close friends [or a] spouse to get ideas [or] suggestions.*
55. *You have to be a patient teacher of your students! I think I'm better off changing my style of relating with them, than expecting them to come my direction. On the other hand, I sometimes find it enjoyable to do something to surprise them, or get them to laugh.*
56. *I often talk about to my students about our cultural differences and we both learn from it and find it interesting. [It] deepens understanding and tolerance. In general I feel the girls are much more socially sheltered than the boys though.*
57. *Listen to students, ask questions, be open, explain your own culture if they seem interested, don't judge and don't patronize.*

#### **4.6. In terms of the cultural challenges, with whom do they appear more boys or girls? (Extracts 58-63)**

58. *The boys again seem to be more at ease- possibly as they have more freedom and access to more technology.*
59. *The girls pretty much set the tone for a mixed classroom. If the majority is somber and non-responsive, it brings down the energy level of the whole class. If the girls are more upbeat and free, the class comes to life more.*
60. *Lateness [appears] with boys. Shyness is around opposite sex- girls, inappropriateness is around boys, immaturity is among boys and grade negotiation is visible with both genders.*
61. *Boys are more curious about others' cultures; they ask questions, listen and then compare what they hear to their own culture. They always ask 'which culture I think is better' and I always ask them 'which one do you think I think is better?' They always say that of course I would choose my own culture because that is what I have learned. Girls don't ask questions, they just tell you about their own culture. I listen and nod. No struggle.*
62. *I struggled much more with girls when I first came, because I wasn't familiar with the "rules" of how to interact with them – social space, etc. Now, I sometimes turn off the A/C in the classroom for a period of time to make sure I can understand what they're saying. I also walk through their rows, and stop and look at their work without (apparent) problems.*
63. *Boys seem to be more open to the world and other cultures; girls tend to be brought up in a bubble of their own world.*

#### **4.7. Linguistic Problems (Written vs. Spoken)**

##### **A. Mother tongue interference (Extracts 64-67)**

64. *Always there- in grammar and spelling.*
65. *Does any Arab speaker ever use the past tense? It apparently exists in Arabic. I think students' English mistakes are completely fossilized by the time they get to college, so there is more understanding receptively but very little usage in reality (of things like articles, word order.)*

66. *Yes, I still find I have to really work hard to understand some students. Example: substituting /p/ for /b/.*
67. *Relative pronouns, subjects in relative clauses, word order and use of articles.*

**B. Sound system (Pronunciation) (Extracts 68-69)**

68. *I have never once met an Omani who was interested in pronunciation. It is just not important to them. (Does this stem from having such a mixture of accents from their school teachers?).*
69. *Huge problem with some of them, because they were never taught proper pronunciation, and now the verbal behaviors are quite embedded. /g/ vs. /j/ for example.*

**C. Orthographic system (Extracts 70-73)**

70. *Mostly ok apart from capitals.*
71. *Actually, I find their hand-writing basically good, but their spelling is generally deficient. I attribute that to poor training in elementary and secondary schools. It's pretty hopeless to try to explain why words are spelled as they are. You just have to hope they're visual learners, and can develop strategies to train themselves.*
72. *Vowels are difficult.*
73. *English is vastly different from Arabic. Spelling is a big issue. Arabic is so phonetic that students spell phonetically in English. Also, [there is the system of] the left to right writing/capitalization.*

**5. With whom do linguistic problems appear more boys or girls? (Extracts 74-77)**

74. *Boys as they tend not to put in as much effort into their work. [They are] a bit like the UK.*
75. *I find it to be pretty well evenly distributed. The only thing that would differentiate them is that I find the girls to be on the whole better students, so they frequently are better regarding these challenges.*
76. *This is a difficult question. I find the girls to be better students and work harder than the boys (in general), and quite possibly have better pronunciation. However, they are more timid, and more difficult to hear in a crowded classroom. Some of the boys have seriously*

*impaired pronunciation, too, and would have to exert considerable effort to learn proper pronunciation, and completely change their behavior. A few of the boys – possibly more than girls – have exposure to Western movies and media, and demonstrate better fluency based on that.*

77. *Girls tend to be more perfectionist and study harder. I think it deepens more on the person's personality.*

All the linguistic problems that those respondents mentioned can be referred to some factors mentioned by Gubaily [3]. These are mother tongue interference and learners' sticking to the old habits of learning. Further, sound errors are made because of the absence of some English sounds in Arabic like the /p/ and /v/. Add to this, the orthographic system of English is different than the Arabic one. Low proficiency of learners is the last reason that can contribute to students making mistakes.

**5.1. Practical recommendations to overcome linguistic challenges? (Extracts 78-95)**

78. *Group work, Peer reviews, encouraging checking of skills, talking about errors, timed practice (peer reviews) traffic lighting of understanding through the lesson. Going through a mark scheme-useful for peer review.*
79. *Arabic students appear to work better together than British ones so it seems logical to play to those strengths. There is a limit as to what they can do after hours so maximizing the quality of class input is essential.*
80. *I have an intermediate understanding of Arabic, so the mother tongue influences are easier to spot and address from this point of view. Integrate more specific pronunciation lessons into students' pacing schedule. I'm a very strong proponent of face-to-face instruction, when possible, and believe that problems with pronunciation and writing are best addressed this way. Once the problems are embedded - and this is quite often the case - it would take a concerted effort to actually change their behaviors.*
81. *Again, a teacher has to study their students, and understand on several levels how to compensate for the culture issues that provide challenges.*
82. *Teach them spelling rhymes/rules, spelling tests, lots of drilling vocab, writing many drafts and get*

*the students to self-correct using any correction code.*

83. *Identify the students' linguistic wants and needs.*
84. *Relate what they already know to what you are trying to teach them.*
85. *Use local examples whenever possible. Do not enter the classroom with the idea that there is something "wrong" with the students and that you are there to "fix" it.*
86. *Celebrate their achievements.*
87. *Demonstrate to them that they are making progress.*
88. *Offer them new ways of looking at old problems.*
89. *Encourage them to feel empowered- boys and girls.*
90. *Show your care.*
91. *Refer to their culture and religion with respect.*
92. *Accept the fact we live in a world where English is used for international communication.*
93. *Accept that being a native-speaker no longer privileges you. There are probably a lot of non-native speakers who are better teachers than you are.*
94. *Do your best to remain current with the latest thinking. Remember that your qualification can date you. Go to conferences*
95. *Present at conferences and publish*

As mentioned earlier these findings from, Western teachers in the Language Centre, reveal suggestions and lend themselves as solutions to better teaching practices.

## 6. Significance and Implications

The researcher believes that conducting this study in the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University is going to add to the literature of teaching English as a foreign language to Omani and Arab students. Also significantly, western teachers who teach English should be able to overcome those cultural and linguistic challenges to help them better understand their students more effectively and make the entire process of teaching a more fruitful and fulfilling job. Another significant point is that in the light of knowing those cultural and linguistic barriers, western teachers and course designers need to adapt and utilize suitable course materials and adopt efficient teaching practices.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has been conducted to investigate two major questions on the cultural and linguistic

challenges that Western Teachers struggle with when teaching in the classroom. It has been observed that teaching English language in an EFL context is hard and challenging culturally and linguistically. Hence, ample suggestions and practical tips and strategies are offered for Western faculty to overcome those difficulties and help them better understand the culture of their teaching environment.

## 8. Acknowledgements

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