Understanding Students' Culture as a Gateway to a Better Teaching Environment

An Introduction to Saudi Culture

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**Abstract**

The misunderstanding of a student's culture can negatively affect the learning environment, particularly in schools where students go to learn a new language. As an English as a Second Language (ESL) student, I have experienced the misunderstanding of my country's culture. While I was studying ESL in the United States, I was required to read an article titled "Where Do We Stand?" by Lisa Davis (2005) for my academic reading and writing class, and some of the main points of this article relating to the culture in my country, Saudi Arabia, were false. Many students from my country (including myself) felt uncomfortable, and were offended by the untruths and false information portrayed in this article. Thus, this paper is written to refute what was written in Davis' article and to describe some of the values of Saudi culture. The purpose of this paper is to help readers from all backgrounds, and instructors in particular, develop a better understanding of the Saudi culture. Understanding and looking broadly on different students' cultures can help to create a better learning environment.

### Introduction

Being a Saudi student in the U.S, I have experienced personally how understanding student culture helps to improve the learning environment for both students and their instructors. While I was studying English as a second language at the University of Washington, I was required to read an article titled, "Where Do We Stand?" by Lisa Davis (2005) for my academic reading and writing class; this article can be found in the book, *New Directions Reading, Writing and Critical Thinking*. The article addresses the differences between American culture and other cultures in the world, including the culture in my country, Saudi Arabia, with ignorance and insensitivity.  I was offended by the way my culture was represented in this article. There are 53,919 Saudi students in the U.S. (Institute of International Education organization, 2015), most of whom have gone or are going to school in the USA to learn English, so the negative portrayal of their culture among English language learners and instructors is an issue that can affect many people.

Malcolm Knowles, an expert on adult learning theory*,* identifies six principles of adult learning. Respecting adult learners is one of them (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). I believe teaching articles that misrepresent students' culture clearly go against this principle. Moreover, it ignores the importance of making learning a mutual relationship between students and their facilitator (instructor), which is deeply integrated in (Friere, 2000; Tyler, 2013) literatures. In his Hierarchy of Needs theory, Abraham Maslow clarified the importance of feeling respected in order to be motivated to accomplish one's tasks; this concept can be applied to learning as well (Benson & Dundis, 2003). Thus, this paper was written to offer some

explanation and insight into Saudi culture in hope of reducing the falsehoods that are generally

misrepresented in different media and more specifically, in Davis's (2005) article.

**Privacy in Arabic Culture**

In her article, Davis (2005) presented false information about Arabic culture in regard to

privacy. She erred in quoting Peter Bechtold, of the State Department's Foreign Service Institute,

who claimed, "There is no word for privacy in Arabic cultures." He continues, "They think it

means loneliness" (p. 22).  This statement is invalid; there certainly is a word for privacy in

Arabic; it is "الخصوصي which sounds like( "ة*alkososiah*).

In fact, not only do we have the word for privacy in Arabic, but also we have had the

concept of privacy embedded in our culture for more than 1,400 years.  Respect for one's privacy

is taught in the Qur'an, the Holy Book of Islam, which all Muslims respect and follow. In our

Holy Book, for example, God says,

> Believers, do not enter other houses than your own until you have the approval of the
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> inmates and have wished them peace; this is the best way for you: it is expected that you
>
> will observe it. And if you do not find anyone therein, do not enter them until permission
>
> has been given you. And if it is said to you, Go back, then go back; it is purer for you.
>
> And Allah is knowing of what you do. (Qur'an 24:27-28)

The Qur'an clearly states that we cannot enter anyone's house without his permission; for

instance, if someone says, "I cannot meet with you," we accept that. We understand the concept,

and we respect each other's right to privacy.  We do it not only to be respectful to our neighbors,

but also to obey God.  For Muslims, especially those from the Arabian Gulf, religion is a very

important part of our culture. Though we might disagree with each other for one reason or

another, when someone quotes the Qur'an, the discussion is over. Respecting others' privacy is an order from God, and Muslims seek to adhere to all of God's commandments.

In addition to following the Word of God, Muslims lead their lives based on the teachings of Prophet Mohammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and the behaviors of his followers. Thus, besides what our God says in the Holy Book, the Prophet Mohammad taught Muslim people how important it is to respect the privacy of other people. For example, a man asked him, "Messenger of Allah, shall I ask permission of my mother to enter?" He said, "Yes." The man said, "I live with her in the house." Prophet Mohammad said, "Ask her permission." The man said, "I am her servant." The Prophet repeated, "Ask her permission. Do you want to see her naked?" He said, "No." the Prophet concluded, "Then, ask her permission" (Malik, n.d).

We are taught to respect privacy, not only that of our loved ones, but also the privacy of people whom we do not know. We also respect the privacy of others in public. For example, once one believes in God and his Prophet, he is required to pray five times a day in a mosque where other Muslims pray. However, there is an exception to this rule when one has consumed onions or garlic; we believe that interfering with another's prayer space with an offensive odor is an example of disrespecting one's privacy. Our Prophet said, "Whoever eats garlic or onion should keep away from our mosque or should remain in his house" (Al-Bukhari, 854). It is clear, then, that Arab Muslims recognize the importance of respecting the space between people for over a millennium.

There is a famous story in our culture about Umar bin al-Khattabe, who was the second Caliph (leader) for all Muslim countries after the death of our prophet Mohammad. Umar learned that some Muslim people had drunk alcohol, which is prohibited in Islam, so he went to reprove

them. He jumped over a wall to enter the property. Once he rebuked them, they replied, "If we made one mistake, you made three. It is not right for you to spy on us. You did not come through the door, and you came to our home without our permission." The Caliph promptly apologized and left the premises.

These are just a few examples of how much Islamic and Arabic cultures value privacy. It appears that the Davis (2005) article does not include adequate research about the topic of privacy in Arab cultures and simply quotes her source, making her own claims less credible.

**Arrogant and Offensive Language**

Also, according to Knowles, adults must feel respected in order to learn (Knowles et al., 2011). However, not every required article or book makes students feeling respected. Davis's (2005) article was written with an arrogant tone. For example, she stated, "Personal space is not so hard for people to learn" (p. 22). This is a blatant example of cultural insensitivity. Certainly, if an American were invited to Saudi Arabia, he/she would have to learn how to decrease the size of his or her *personal bubble* or risk being perceived as cold, unfriendly, and untrustworthy. Most disappointing is the egocentric approach the author takes toward her topic in a text for international students, this kind of bias offends students easily and should be avoided. The negative portrayal of students' culture in their textbooks makes the learning goal harder to achieve.  Teachers in multiethnic education settings might make their students feel discriminated against by discounting the variances between their own culture and their students' culture (Gaudelli, 2006).

Some of the language that is used in school environments can be offensive for people in other cultures. For example, in her article, Davis (2005) quotes, "I have had American pilots

come in here and say, 'I do not want some S.O.B holding my hand.' Then I see them there, holding the hand of a Saudi." The writer provides a definition for the term "S.O.B" as "son of a bitch," a vulgar term referring to an offensive or disagreeable person, usually a male" (p. 22).

For most people from the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, vulgar language is not part of their daily vocabulary, and highly unacceptable to be used.  Hence, hearing these words on a street makes them uncomfortable. It would make them feel more uncomfortable when they see bad language being used in their textbook to refer to people in their country. The term "S.O.B." that was used in the text can be considered as a highly offensive term for a Saudi person who had to study this article.

In Saudi culture, personal space and touching are perceived much differently than they are in the U.S. People in Saudi Arabia believe in the *language of touch*. Touching friends from the same gender or holding their hands generally means that they trust each other. Saudis believe it is innately human to communicate through touch. It is not something to be afraid of, nor should it be a reason to act aggressively toward one another. Saudis' acceptance of personal space and touch stems, in part, from our traditions of family size and living environments.

**Family in Saudi Arabia**

Unlike the individualistic culture of Western societies, most Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, embrace a more collective culture where people put more emphasis on the benefit to the overall group than on one's individual needs (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.). Saudi people learn from childhood to care for, rely upon, need, and depend on each other.

In Saudi culture, the concepts of family and tribe are very important. This might be a consequence of the environment that our people used to live in, as a big part of Saudi Arabia is

desert. In the past, in order to survive, people would travel from one place to another in search of food and water. The difficulty of this lifestyle required people to bond and depend on one another. Therefore, the idea of serving others is deeply rooted in our culture. Though Saudis are no longer struggling to fulfill their basic needs, we still rely on each other for support. For example, when a member of the family needs financial help, gets married, or builds a new house, the family takes up a collection to help him.  When someone is overcome with emotion, whether good or bad, the family steps in to help.  In many cases, we put our family's needs above our own.

Compared to the size of families in the United States, the size of families in Saudi Arabia are large. It is not unusual to find several same-gender siblings sharing one bedroom; brothers share a room, and sisters share another. However, siblings are not just brothers or sisters; they are friends, classmates, and teachers, too. For example, in my case, we are 10 children from the same mother and father. I shared a bedroom with three of my brothers. We all went to the same school, and one of my brothers was in my class, and on my sports teams for 10 years. Now, each one of us is married and have children, but we still live together in the same house with our parents. We call it the *big house*, which means the grandparents' house; parents and children all live together in apartment style homes under one roof, or multiple houses on one compound. It is our belief that it is time for our parents to enjoy the adult children as well as the grandchildren without all the responsibility. We believe it is not fair to abandon them, and live somewhere away from them. It is the time when they need their family around to care for and support them.

The very idea of 10 related families living in one dwelling might be strange for many, but that does not mean it is wrong; it is just different. American parents have their reasons to have

few children, and Saudi parents have their reasons to have many children. For the purpose of this paper, there is no need to go deep in the idea of the number of family members in my country, but when I think about this idea, I remember my mother when she told me once, "I wanted many children because I had known that many of them would not be able to survive for a long time; children die so young. Therefore, I do not want to lose all of them."

Instead of making fun of some people's culture or saying it is wrong, we need to think of people's reasons for their actions. Sure enough, as long as we are seeking the truth, we should respect their decision, or at least be able to understand their reasons. Some people from small households may wonder how privacy could possibly exist under those conditions. To them, privacy is seclusion that is created by four walls and a door. To people from large families, privacy may be something else entirely; it could be a family member recognizing that a topic of discussion is causing you discomfort and changing the subject on your behalf. Having a wall between you and the next person is not important. Most Saudis place value on connection and on deep personal relationships. Many people might find this hard to accept, but it is just a different culture. It is exactly like a different language; we might not understand it, but it makes sense for its people.

**Sharing as a Way of Living**

Sharing and caring are perceived differently from culture to culture; what a collectivist culture perceives as caring, an individualist culture might consider an infringement of privacy (Hofstede, 2001). Interestingly, there is a theory about the relationship between good health and deep sharing and caring. In his book *Outliers,* Malcolm Gladwell (2008) wrote about a village in Pennsylvania State named Roseto. In this village, heart disease is not reported in anyone below

the age of 65. Gladwell calls it *the Roseto Mystery.* The doctor who discovered this phenomenon,

Stewart Wolf, studied digestion and the human stomach, and taught in the medical school at the

University of Oklahoma. Wolf needed the aid of Sociologist John Bruhn to help him research

this phenomenon, and what Bruhn realized about this village was very surprising:

> There was no suicide, no alcoholism, no drug addiction, and very little crime. They did
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> not have any one on welfare. Then we looked at peptic ulcers. They did not have any of
>
> those either. These people were dying of old age. That is it. (p. 5-6)
>
> Wolf's research illuminates the "*secret*" to the remarkable health of the townspeople:

their social ties. They were deeply connected, and always visiting, caring for, and helping each

other. Many homes had three generations living under one roof, and grandparents were highly

respected (Gladwell, 2008). When I read about this village, I related to it; it sounds somewhat

like my hometown.  I believe this example shows how great and important it is for us to share

our lives with people whom we love and care about. This interrelatedness begins with the

immediate family, continues outward to the extended family, and eventually reaches the entire

community.

**Cross-Cultural Misunderstanding**

The meaning of privacy and how it is perceived are not always the same around the

world; therefore, when people from different cultures interact with each other, awkward

situations might occur (Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973).  A writer who is exposed to a

different culture might write about these differences, and how he/she was surprised by these

differences. However, it is difficult to understand why a writer would misrepresent or negatively

portray another culture, simply because he experiences that culture as different.

In her article, *Cross-Cultural Communication*, Debora Tannen (1983) stated, "Cross-cultural communication is always closely related to teaching English as a second language" (p. 2). Brislin et al. (1973) defined *cross-cultural psychology* as "the empirical study of members of various culture groups who have had different experiences that lead to predictable and significant differences in behavior" (p. 5). In general, cross-cultural misunderstanding occurs when one or both parties are ignorant of the other's cultural norms.  Feelings and emotions are expressed very differently from culture to culture. The environment in which one is raised largely determines one's manner of social interaction.

**Showing respect.** Respect in one culture may be shown by lowering the head and avoiding eye contact, whereas in another culture, respect may be shown by shaking hands and giving direct eye contact (Davis, 2005). In fact, sometimes a gesture of respect in one culture can be perceived as an offensive act in other culture. For example, if an American male tries to greet a Saudi female by shaking her hand, most likely she will not shake his hand back. Furthermore, an attempt to greet her by offering a hug could be considered harassment, a crime, since women in Islam should not be touched by a man outside their immediate family.

**The way of addressing people's names.** Tang (2005) gives an example of how people in American culture refer to each other, which is very different than the way that Chinese people respond to one another. She stated,

> In the United States, people usually call each other by first name rather than family name. Everyone does this, including colleagues, classmates, students and teachers, friends, relatives, even children and parents. Americans do not like to be treated with special deference for age or position. (p. 37)

Similarly, in Saudi culture, calling someone who is older or in a higher position than you by his/her first name is not appropriate.

The culture of Saudi Arabia is considered to be a *high power distance culture*, where authority is highly respected (Hofstede, 2001). People prefer to be called by their eldest son's name.  For example, if a man has a son called Mohammad, people will call him Abo Mohammad, *father of Mohammad*, and if he does not have a son, he prefers to be called by his father's first name.  The same arrangement is made for females; a woman would be referred to as *Aum*, meaning *mother of*.

**Main meal time.** What people eat and when they eat can differ widely around the world. That might be a challenge that many Saudi students may face in the U.S. Unlike in the U.S., the main meal in Saudi Arabia is lunch. In the article in question, Davis (2005) quoted Peter Bechtold, who stated, "What is really much harder is the business of dinner being served at midnight" (p. 22); other than the arrogant way of phrasing this sentence, it is clear that the speaker did not spent much time studying the culture he criticized. Dinner is not served at midnight every day in Saudi Arabia; that is an absurd generalization. On special occasions, when people are celebrating or showing respect to someone, a dinner may start and end late.  However, the author's statement implies that midnight is dinnertime. What the author fails to mention is that there are geographical, cultural, and religious reasons for a late dinnertime.

First of all, the climate is a major factor.  At noon or 1 o'clock, when Americans generally eat lunch, the temperature is extremely hot in Saudi Arabia. Before the advance of air conditioning, it would have been extremely uncomfortable to cook and eat in that heat.  We delay lunchtime until 3 p.m., which is much more comfortable.  By that time, everyone is very

hungry, so that is when we eat our largest meal of the day.  The exception is when we host a guest at our home, and at those times, we will have two big meals, or the big meal will be served late as a sign of respect.

Secondly, at 6 or 7 o'clock, a normal dinnertime in North America, people are still digesting their large lunch and have not worked up a hunger for supper yet. Therefore, it would not make sense to serve a meal at that time. In addition, that is when the sun goes down and it finally becomes possible to enjoy the outdoors.  People in Saudi Arabia spend the evening walking around and connecting with family, friends, and neighbors.

The third reason for a late supper is that once social activities conclude, it is prayer time. We call it *Alesha*. Muslim people pray five times a day, and the last prayer starts about an hour and half after sun down. By the time we pray Alesha, it is around 8:00 or 8:30, which is when dinner is prepared. We eat around 9 p.m. Saudi people wake up earlier and go to bed much later than Americans do in order to enjoy moderate temperatures. When the sun is high, we rest.

Davis (2005) should have understood and given the reasons for our behavior, and should not have painted an exaggerated picture of Saudis. In describing our culture in the way she does, Davis missed a very good teaching opportunity.

## Conclusion

What I most wish to convey is my belief that when a cultural practice or behavior is different, it is not automatically wrong; it is just different. International students experience life in new ways when they travel to a new country and make international friends.  Learning to respect and appreciate these differences is part of the educational process. Therefore, schools

should use reading materials that explore cultural differences in a positive and instructional way. I hope this paper will help to increase general understanding of Saudi culture, in addition to creating a better learning environment for Arab students in general Saudi students in particular, and their instructors.

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