

Working Together: Bringing Muslim Students into the ESL Classroom

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In this article I first situate the value of cultural analysis and review why looking at Muslim culture can be informative. I then address the challenge of looking at Muslims as a single group and generalities that might be applied. I conclude by looking at how some issues impact the classroom. Recognizing and understanding the role of culture for Muslim students can improve the overall classroom experience for all concerned.

HOW IMPORTANT IS CULTURE, REALLY?

Readers of this newsletter will likely realize the importance of intercultural communication and learning about different cultures. However, I believe it vital that we remember two facts.

First, there are universal attributes human beings share. Everyone shares certain desires and understandings regardless of who they are. Everyone wants to feel validated. Everyone understands pain and joy for themselves and for others. All students (and teachers), regardless of their culture, are human beings with fears, talents, and aspirations.

Second, each student is an individual. Individuals vary enormously. Some cleave to their culture; others reject it; most adopt varying relations to it. The various cultural, social, religious, and life experiences all people undergo differ and make everyone unique. Linguistic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds can reveal some things about people, but they are never the whole picture. Individuals also interact with their culture and the world around them differently. Understanding a culture is just one part of understanding each of the individual students in class. An individual can understand his or her own culture, but that does not mean he or she understands every individual in it; rather, it means merely that he or she has an idea of the cultural systems. Thus, culture is but one very illuminating factor in helping us understand our students. Culture affects, but does not dictate, most aspects of life, from what people eat to how they interact with others to how they conceptualize the world around them.

WHY TALK ABOUT MUSLIMS?

About 20 percent of the world's population is Muslim. In the United States, there has been significant growth in refugees from conflict areas such as Bosnia, Somalia, and Afghanistan. A growing number of Muslims, such as Saudis in intensive English programs, have entered as students. Combined with this are tensions seen in the media and highlighted by President Obama in his speech at Cairo University (2009), noting issues such as terrorism, Islamophobia, freedom of religion, nuclear weapons, and Israel/Palestine.

As Rich and Troudi (2006) remind us, values and politics cannot be entirely excluded from the classroom. If Islamophobia, terrorism, and other issues from the media impact us or our students, they can form a lingering backdrop in the ESL classroom. It behooves teachers to understand how this can be managed to best serve learners.

CAN WE REALLY TALK ABOUT MUSLIMS AS ONE GROUP?

Like other cultural communities, the Muslim community is not monolithic. From Saudi Arabia to Suriname and Fiji to Canada, Muslims have varying histories, languages, and cultures. Just as individuals vary, so do subcultures.

At both the individual level and the subculture level, we must avoid painting with a broad brush. As Fuller and Lesser (1995) warned,

A sweeping “civilizational” approach can even be harmful over the longer run, not so much because it is false in all cases but because that kind of emotive characterization leads to simplistic and damaging views by both sides, a recipe for self-fulfilling prophecies. (p. 5)

In addition to differences between Muslim cultures, there are also differences in the impact of modernism. Just as modern society and its benefits and ills have penetrated the rest of the world unevenly, so too in the Muslim world. Students may arrive fully familiar with many of the latest social and technological developments, or they may bring experiences that have changed little in generations. Although this differing impact can shape linguistic and cultural patterns, there are still some important shared aspects of Muslim culture.

WHAT ARE SOME COMMONALITIES?

Bearing the previous caveat in mind, we can look at some generalizations.

The very fact that one can talk about Muslims, rather than Arabs, Turks, or Africans, indicates that religion plays a significant role in society. Religion in the Muslim world is widely viewed as a positive thing, integral to social harmony and supportive of stability and unity. It is often also viewed as more public than it is in the secular West or in East Asia. This leads to an emphasis on both a relationship with God and morality. Thus questions of both day-to-day living and more general philosophical issues are heavily influenced by religious thought. For example, any visitor to a Muslim nation is reminded of this by the *azan*, or call to prayer, five times a day, and even secular Muslim nations generally have more legal restrictions on issues viewed as personal moral issues in the West, such as pornography, homosexuality, and abortion.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT THE CLASSROOM?

Though there remains considerable debate about cultural and linguistic imperialism, there is a strong indication that negotiation and exchange of views on topics ranging from the banal to the controversial can produce excellent results in a class (e.g., Ernst, 1994). Muslim students come with differing expectations, and so do non-Muslim students and faculty, but an open and realistic dialog can offer learners an opportunity for language use as well as a better understanding of viewpoints of both Muslim and non-Muslim students.

In my experience and through conversations with colleagues, numerous areas may cause concern in the ESL classroom. The most frequent seem to include gender relations, the role of religion in society, and views on science.

Each of these could be the subject of a much longer article. What is important is that instructors try to gain at least a minimal understanding of the culture and viewpoints of their Muslim students and approach controversial topics with tact and consideration.

Religion in general, Islam in particular, is respected in Muslim cultures. Views on organized religion naturally vary considerably, but there remains an underlying respect for the divine. Mocking, disparaging, or even sidelining the spiritual side of life is much less common than in the secular West and can be met with shock, dismay, or even anger. Challenging dialog is certainly possible, but the likelihood of alienating students can be

diminished if teachers approach spiritual issues with respect for the sensitivities of students in whose lives religion and spirituality play a central role.

Science and religion have an exceedingly complex relationship far beyond the scope of this brief overview. What is germane is that the historical interplay of faith and reason has been different in the Muslim world than in the West. Consequently, Muslims tend to have fewer problems seeing religion playing a role in science and general discourse.

The traditional views of gender division are common in Muslim societies. Men and women are often seen as having differing roles and in some cultures genders are separated, intersecting at the family and rarely outside. Because of this, some Muslims may feel uncomfortable around members of the opposite sex. Most students can quickly adjust to coeducational settings, but—as with most cultural changes—a gentle, supportive introduction can be far more effective than a sudden shock. Starting students off in larger mixed-gender groups in the classroom rather than in pairs can be one way to gently introduce the idea of working with others.

CONCLUSION

If teachers truly want to include their Muslim students along with all their other students, they need to follow the advice of Canagarajah (2006) and move from an *us/them* to a *we* perspective that recognizes the universal and the individual along with the cultural (p. 27).

As teachers interact with students, they also interact with themselves. In a true learner-centered approach, Muslim and non-Muslim teachers and students can benefit from each other's perspectives, building on the strengths each individual brings to the class. If we listen to students, elicit their voices, and learn together, we as well as our students can benefit.

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