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## The Individual as a Context

As contributors to the ELT In Context series, we have been asked to place ourselves within our contexts to elucidate how we came to be where we are. In my case, I am writing about the place I have just been. I recently left the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) after having spent two and a half years there. I have just begun an English language fellowship in China and have found myself reflecting on differences and similarities in student and teacher cultures in the two countries as well as on the lessons I learned in Saudi. The distance and my new surroundings have given me fresh eyes with which to look upon my experiences in KSA.

I feel a deep connection to KSA and its people. It is a country whose language I have struggled with (and continue to struggle with) for the past several years. I have picked up and set down my Arabic books more times than I care to admit. It is also the country where I researched and wrote my doctoral dissertation, *Attitudes and Acculturation: A Qualitative Case Study of EFL Teachers in Saudi Arabia* (Hastings, 2012). For my PhD, I researched the motivation of expatriate English language teachers. I devoted a great deal of time to researching Saudi history, Saudi's relationship with the West, Westerners and other foreign workers in KSA, housing compounds, the Saudi educational system, and English language teaching (ELT) in KSA. All of these topics directly relate to the theme of this book. On a more personal note, KSA is where I met my wife and where our son was born.

This project is very much a reflection on my time in KSA and the lessons I have learned from working with Saudis and other Gulf Arabs. I am grateful to Andy Curtis and the TESOL International Association for the opportunity to share these perspectives with a larger audience.

### My Background

Consumed by wanderlust and prepared with little more than a BA, I began teaching English as a way to see the world and learn about other cultures. Having studied Spanish, I first turned to Latin America and bought a one-way ticket to

Colombia, where I found a job at an English language institute. When I began my journey, I had no idea how much I would fall in love with teaching, how the joys of engaging learners in dialogue about language and culture could be something that I would have done gratis. I also didn't know where it would take me.

## Interest in Arabic and the Middle East

I left the United States for South America shortly after September 11, 2001, after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, as the world's attention was turning toward the Middle East. One component of my Spanish language study involved reading the newspaper and watching the local news every day. As the war in Afghanistan was starting and the United States was preparing for war in Iraq, the vista from the Latin American press was different than the reports I was reading from home. The increasingly polemical discourse about the Middle East and the nature of Islam fed my growing curiosity about the region. To gain some insight into the culture, I began studying Arabic with the help of a Lebanese tutor and some Israeli students with whom I shared a house in Bogotá. While my limited development and my lack of contact with Arabic speakers slowed my progress for a couple years, I continued to intermittently study the language.

## Introduction to Saudi Culture

In 2006, I was hired by the Texas Intensive English Program (TIEP) in Austin, as it was expanding its program to meet the needs of a growing number of Saudi students on the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship. This is an ambitious program that provides funding for over 100,000 Saudi students to learn languages and earn college degrees at universities overseas.

At TIEP, my morning classes were about one-third Saudi and my afternoon classes and tutoring sessions were almost entirely Saudi. Three years of this gave me a great deal of one-on-one time with Saudi students. Many of these students had never been outside their own country and were dealing with the shock of living in a place where their country and culture were often demonized in the news. I became friends with numerous students and joined with other teachers in learning about their culture. My positive experiences working with them led to a renewed interest in the language, and the desire to pay off my student loans led to a search for language teaching positions in KSA.

## Saudi Arabia

My first position offered me a chance to work with military cadets and live in Jeddah, a port city on the Red Sea. Out of respect for those with whom I worked, and for security-related reasons, I have chosen to avoid including certain details about my language teaching and learning organization (LTO). Instead of offering

specifics, I use the term *uniformed services* to refer to those employed by the government and who are required to wear a uniform. My students there were studying English under the same initiative that brings so many to the United States and other countries. While students with the highest grades and aspirations to go abroad are offered opportunities in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, other students are offered scholarships to study in Saudi universities or to take advantage of vocational training programs and military training opportunities in KSA. As a part of basic training, cadets are offered intensive English training. I spent the last two and a half years with these young men and a number of expats who have made their lives in KSA.

My experiences with Saudi students, both in the United States and in KSA, have given me a distinctive perspective on teaching Saudi students. This is important to me because when people discover that I've worked in Saudi Arabia, they usually have a preconception of what the country must be like, as well as a corresponding stereotype of Saudi Arabians. Likewise, when Saudis found out that I was from the United States, they generally had an idea of what the United States and its people are like. In my experience, neither fully understands the other. My career in TESOL began as a path to understanding, and I would like to make a contribution with this work. I feel a deep connection to Saudi Arabia and its people, and I hope that this book can honor those I've worked with and share some insight with teachers who may be considering going there.