Teaching Approaches and Teachers' Perceptions in Varying Cultures

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ABSTRACT

How do teachers change, alter and refine their approaches and practice to teaching based on their students and arena of the world? This mixed methods study explores the teaching practices, pedagogy and approach of 7 teachers, currently teaching students in the United Arab Emirates. Previously, these teachers had taught students of varying nationalities in different regions of the world. The participants were interviewed as to their current and past experiences, students, activities, practices and outcomes with students of each separate nationality, region and L1. This was followed up with a focus group session. Results found that the teachers adjusted, changed and reformed their approach considerably due to the students' abilities and areas of weakness. The participants at times echoed each other in their accounts of their perceptions of Emirati students' abilities, how they teach them effectively and how they found what works and what does not. These responses were contrasted with the responses given about their previous teaching posts in countries such as Taiwan, Thailand, Japan, France, the Czech Republic, Spain, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Turkey and Poland. The reported teachers' perceptions of the students' academic abilities were consistent with the quantitative data provided by IELTS Partners which are posted as public record. Contentions are made with regard to differing learning styles and the opposition of certain teaching credentials, namely the RSA/ Cambridge CELTA as a universal teaching credential.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout my career in teaching I have found that differing teaching assignments in differing regions in the world with students of differing L1s and learning cultures has led me to change my approach and refine my skills as a teacher. Whether it be changing my focus from that of a grammar and vocabulary emphasis to test preparation mode or trying to get my students to write legibly or construct pronunciation with comprehensible phonemes, my style, character, social boundaries and countless other factors have shifted to tailor to the students I have been assigned and to the culture I have been assigned to teach in.

This has never so much been the case as when I accepted a post in the United Arab Emirates and began teaching Emirati students at a relatively low tertiary level. I found the solid strengths of the students a pleasant surprise (namely strong speaking skills and low levels of

uncertainty avoidance) and with that, the gaping weakness (namely reading comprehension, low levels of diligence) that I as their teacher, had the responsibility to develop.

Another experience of note occurred in my first few days with my new students. I found that they were just as curious about me as I was about them and a flurry of questions abound the room. We talked of issues of family, friends and why I had come to the UAE initially. My responses regarding my 'Western' lifestyle, attitudes and social lifestyle were met, at times, with surprise and confusion. Quickly, I learned that the personable approach I have always had toward my students tested the limits of appropriateness within the classroom. My personal life had always been a matter of more or less public record within the classroom walls and a social tool I exploited to elicit response and spawn classroom discussion. Teaching classes in the Czech Republic for example often turned into informal and social settings telling my students about my life and likewise, loved hearing and learning about theirs. This is why I began this profession. Through the medium of the English language, I felt cultural engagements were part of the journey and an integral part of the linguistic experience. However, I learned through experience and in some cases disciplinary action against me that this was not an educational device I ought to or could use in the classroom. Feedback from supervisors and colleagues led me to this realization.

Additionally, when steps of CELTA-driven 'language presentation' were delivered (i.e. restricted and unrestricted practice), I found my students could not understand the rigidity of the practice and therefore failed to participate. It was a method that they perhaps did not see the theory behind as it was greatly different from the way they have been previously taught. Another pedagogical tool I tried was the practice of teaching grammar through what I called 'grammar formulas'. During my time teaching university students in South Korea, I found my students had greater ease in visual and explicit forms of grammar instruction. For instance, upon teaching the Present Perfect Continuous tense, I would use such an approach.

[Subj. + have/has + been + verb-ing + obj.]

We   have   been   living   in Seoul for many years.

The approach of explicit instruction I had had success with in teaching South Koreans was less effective with my Emiratis students. The idea of simply "plugging in" different parts of speech into the formula was an angle that my Emirati students tended to resist in my experience. The success that I found involved my South Korean students learning and using the formulas to construct meaningful written sentences whereas my Emirati students could regurgitate the formula but often failed to take the next step in applying it.

These are just a few examples of the changes in approach I have had to undertake in my teaching strategy. To date, I have taught English in 5 countries, one of which was a multi-cultural setting of ESL in the United States where I had as many as 20 different nationalities in a classroom. My real reflection came upon how I approached teaching in the other 4 countries and cultures. Considering the changes that I have personally made in my approach, I wondered what other teachers have done. My sample of 4 countries hardly did a substantial experience make. In this interpretive study, I set out to explore what different approaches other teachers made to teach the English language and educate their students based on the teachers' own concepts of

'Western culture' and educational practices. What I found was that I was not alone in necessity to change my perspective, outlook, practice and work. Various cultures present various learning outcomes to strive for, various strengths to build upon, various weaknesses to compensate for and various cultural taboos to consider in one's approach. For instance, one of the weaknesses many of my respondents cited of their Emiratis students is their lack of critical thinking skills and in turn, their frustrations instilling this skill in their students.   Atkinson notes that this 'Western' skill may well not be suitable for certain cultures in the first place stating that teaching this skill or expecting this skill to be honed "Marginalizes alternative approaches to thought, approaches that may in fact lead to more socially desirable consequences in the long run" (Atkinson, 1997). Therefore, certain Western assumptions are taken into the classroom and consequently affect what desired outcomes are placed upon the students.

That *culture* is a social construction raises the question of whether or not it could be considered as an analytic category for academic investigation. Atkinson argues that two distinct ways of thinking about 'culture' in TESOL emerge. It is the *received view* of culture that is the focus of this paper. By this, received view of culture is meant as the "all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine personal behavior" (Atkinson, 1999). There have been those to suggest that 'bottom-up power relations' and a 'mass-globalized culture' are the ways forward in our field of TESOL (Atkinson, 1999). However, in terms of teaching approach, I find it premature and irresponsible to deny the existence of difference and set forth in this explorative study with the assumption that they do exist. This, as expected, leads one to broad generalizations as products of perception. Simply stating that "Emiratis have difficulty reading in English" paints a subjective broad stroke across an entire population yet remains a widely accepted view in ELT in the UAE. Generalizations such as this require further investigation.

I decided to explore to what extent these generalizations correspond to the given teachers' perceptions and how they affect their teaching practices. The aim of this study is not to put students, cultures or learning styles in boxes or categories but rather to explore the teaching methods, approaches and practices of 7 teachers which have had experience in various cultural arenas and regions of the world. Additionally, inquiries were made as to the tendencies of misuse of English based on students' L1. According to Swan & Smith, it is necessary for teachers of English to anticipate characteristic difficulties that students of certain mother tongues may have (Swan & Smith, 2001).   I wished to take this a step further. The approaches drawn upon have been based multiple factors including students' strengths, weaknesses, type of institution, student goals, ease or difficulty of instruction, learning styles, classroom management and many others.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 - The Notion of Culture

Reviewing what others have researched before on this topic has been more of a practice in piecework in that comparisons have been explored between few binaries of cultures but not as

wide as the scope here. This is perhaps an imperfection of this study considering the ambitious task of exploring so many regions of the world. There has been a mild amount of studies, some of which are discussed here comparing and contrasting teach approaches between *specific* cultures as well as fundamental comparisons drawn in basic cultural anthropology.

Palfreyman notes that when dealing with teaching approaches across cultures, one needs to "reconsider 'universals' in university learning" (Palfreyman & McBride, 2007). By this, one surmises that the standard teaching methodology one might have been trained in could well present itself as inappropriate or ineffective in practice in certain cultures. I will visit this notion later with a discussion of the RSA/Cambridge CELTA certification. Seeing what tendencies of certain learners have and the reflections that exist in test scores give one a point of reference of rationale for teaching approaches but skirts a dangerous line of stereotyping and categorizing people of specific regions of the world. Further, the *comparison* of learning styles or even tendencies has gotten minimal exposure. Apfelthaler et.al use the word "neglect" in the exploration of the potential link between learning styles and culture (Apfelthaler, 2007). This present study, as mentioned before, aims not to categorize a cultures' learning style but rather explore one level higher, an outsider's teaching approach to the perceived learning style.

Thus in doing this, perceptions of 'culture' are employed from my respondents. A very broad term, perceptions of national, learning, traditional, classroom, behavioral and religious cultures were reported. This word "culture" is one of the most complex words in which the scope, level and regions that accompany it are becoming increasing blurred and negotiable (Holliday, 2009). The idea itself is hotly debated within academic TESOL circles. Gupta & Ferguson note that the term is at times "avoided by those working in this vein as one so encumbered and compromised as to be misleading or dangerous" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). One facet of the perceived danger here, according to Zamel is "teachers and researchers who see students as bound by their culture trapped by their own cultural tendency to reduce, categorize and generalize" (Zamel, 1997). According to Ingold,

> What we do not find [when studying cultures] are neatly bound and mutually exclusive bodies of thought and custom, perfectly shared by all who subscribe to them, and in which their lives and works are fully encapsulated…. The isolated culture has been revealed as a figment of the Western anthropological imagination. It might be more realistic, then, to say that people *live culturally* rather than that they *live in cultures*. (Ingold, 1994).

There are even those that wish to do away with the term altogether within the TESOL field preferring rather to use terms such as "identity" and "difference" as less contestable. However, I tend to agree with Atkinson more when he states that despite all of this "there is perhaps no more important concept in the field of TESOL than culture" (Atkinson, 1999). What this paper sets out to do is to focus on what Holliday calls the "Big Culture" the culture of ontology and how that transcends into the classroom and not the 'small culture" of objects, foods and other materials. The framework of this study is with these dangers considered. The perceptions stated and analyzed here are with the aforementioned concepts in mind. Throughout the interviews, the terms "in general" and the "avoiding generalization" were noted by both myself and the interviewees. Response and data are given with the assumption that 'culture' is

not a fixed notion but as, Atkinson puts it one that is "travelling, unrooted, permeable and permeating, ever-developing and changing, and inherently unstable" (Atkinson, 1999). Given this, one still cannot negate the notion of difference, albeit ever-changing and perhaps varying amongst individuals within a nationality, ethnic group or religion. As Humes and Reilly point out

> National and ethnic cultures affect the objects or thing that people have as well as the ideas, values, attitudes and beliefs they adopt…People make assumptions about the way things should be based on their cultural backgrounds, and these assumptions influence their behavior in individual, group, and other organizational situations. But when individuals become exposed to other cultures, situations may not turn out as expected based on these inevitable differences in cultural backgrounds (Humes & Reilly, 2008).

Ideas like these construct the framework of this research and are at the heart of what I wished to explore. It is worth noting however as Holliday puts it, studies and explorations such as this and even the very practice or study of Intercultural Communication is "inherently problematic and to emphasize difference rather than communality" (Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2010). Careful and responsible distinctions were the focuses of the line of questioning to the participants, as the latter is acknowledged here.

2.2 - Elements of learning

Apfelthaler et al. note clearly that changes in a learning environment can mean changes in learning styles (Apfelthaler, 2007). I take this a step further in stating that the learning environment can also jettison the teaching style and approach to a given classroom and its makeup of students. In their study commissioned by the European Union, Apfelthaler et. al set out to gauge the level of difference in learning style between four groups of students from Austria, Germany, Singapore and Thailand (Apfelthaler, 2007). The following criteria were considered.

1) Willingness or reluctance to work in groups
2) Interaction with professors
3) Teaching methods
4) Students' own role in educational process
5) The physical teaching environment (Apfelthaler, 2007)

Their results found 23 significantly different facets of learning between nationalities (Apfelthaler, 2007). Considering these results, I further came to wonder how those teachers conducted their lessons, managed their classrooms and presented new empirical information differently across these arenas of learning.

These results were found with the underpinning of the work of Hofstede who in 2001 laid out the six components of classroom culture being *power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, long-term orientation*, and *collectivism/individualism* (Hofstede, 1986). Through surveys and interviews with both students and teachers, Apfelthaler et. al found that the students from these diverse backgrounds did, in fact, bring with them "different attitudes toward these aspects of learning [Hofstede's six components]" (Apfelthaler, 2007).

2.3 - Eastern / Western learning styles – Differences Considered

Ng offers some insight into the rationale behind these learning styles between "Western" and "Eastern" students. She notes that differences in ontology as well as the existence of Confucian values exist in "Eastern" students which highly affect their learning style (Ng, 2007). The teachers interviewed for this study cited more attentive students, less confrontation and what Hofstede would call high levels of *uncertainty avoidance* (Hofstede, 1986). This is echoed by Ng when she states "Confucian philosophy and East Asian upbringing place tremendous value on education…and is not concerned with the control of others or of the environment, but is rather concerned with self-control. Debate is discouraged as leading to discord" (Ng, 2007).

Regarding teaching style, Ng found through interviews of Far East Asian students that students recognized that differences exist with Western and Eastern styles of education.(Ng, 2007). Rote learning, regurgitation of facts and accepted plagiarism were aspects of an Eastern style that the students had been used to (Ng, 2007). When asked which kind of teaching approach they would prefer from their Western teachers, the student overwhelmingly responded that they expected and were ready for "Western" style teaching (Ng, 2007).

2.4 - Eastern / Western learning styles – Differences Questioned

Littlewood questions these and other notions of distinction between Eastern and Western learning styles and preferences (Littlewood, 2001). In his study of over 2,500 students from various countries in Europe, North America and Asia, he found few significant results in preference of learning style. Specifically in response to questions regarding perceived notions of *individualism/collectivism* as well as attitudes toward authority, the data which he collected suggested that minute differences existed. For example, when asked to respond to a Likert scale expressing levels of agreement or disagreement, item such as:

- I like activities where I am part of a group in which we are all working toward common goals.
- Sometimes I feel nervous to answer a question because I am afraid of being wrong

The difference between the raw scores in these responses failed to be statistically significant (Littlewood, 2001). Previous research suggested these items are paramount and are key issues in distinctions between Western and Eastern attitudes toward learning. Other responses to items concerned with the teacher's role and responsibility in learning and knowledge, and learning

environment dispel traditional ideas of what Eastern and Western students perceive education to entail (Littlewood, 2001). This leads one to question apparent outdated notions of 'shared values'.

Continuing along similar themes, Khuvasanond et. al explores the learning style that students were used to employing in their prior education (Khuvasanound, Sildus, Hurford, & Lipka, 2010). Results of this current study point toward this leading to student preference in teaching style. This can be inferred to be educational residue of the students' experience with previous teaching methods. Khuvasanond et al. compare teaching approaches of ESL teachers in the United States which employ strategies such as games, storytelling and role playing with the teaching strategies used in EFL classrooms in Thailand which often consist of rote learning, vocabulary list and spelling tests (Khuvasanound, Sildus, Hurford, & Lipka, 2010). The argument is that passive learning strategies while useful in practice were detrimental in retention when compared to the active learning strategy in ESL classrooms (Khuvasanound, Sildus, Hurford, & Lipka, 2010). However it should be noted and referenced later in the results section that the Thai students were perceived to have preferred the teacher to utilize the passive methods that they had grown accustomed to in their secondary education (Khuvasanound, Sildus, Hurford, & Lipka, 2010).

That being said, an additional phenomenon has been known to occur in which the learner experiences a feeling of entrapment within an imposed learning culture. Basher –Ali notes of his Emirati students at Abu Dhabi Women's College "Many ESL newcomers [students] feel pressured to assimilate into the dominant social culture of their schools causing them to deny their own language and cultural identities" (Bashir-Ali, 2006). What an ESL or EFL teacher is left with is the balance between assimilating to the students' preferred style of teaching which may lead to the ease of delivery and classroom management for the teacher, and the imposition of the teacher's foreign approach which could be perceived as infringing on boundaries of the local culture and native tongue.

2.5 - Afrikaners of South Africa & Arabs of North Africa

Cronje further uses the work of Hofstede as a backdrop to explore the cross-cultural experiences of Afrikaners of South Africa and Arabs of the Sudan in terms of shared understanding of aspects of learning, testing criteria, learning tasks and other cultural scenarios in the classroom (Cronje, 2007). Having white-middle class professors teach Arabs of the Sudan necessitated a shift in their teaching approach much in the same way as the participants in this current study. To achieve the ultimate idea of 'shared meaning', the professors themselves needed to become "culturally neutral". For the purpose of further discussion regarding the relationship between teaching approach and learning style, I join Cronje in mentioning Bonham et al. who offer a constructivist's point of view to combat cultural issues.

> A teacher who wishes to have a useful, comfortable climate for interaction and learning will do well to remember that culture is created by group negotiation and not by authority's fiat" (Bonham, Cifuentes, & Murphy, 2006).

Cronje finds that Hofstede ideas about differing levels of *power distance, uncertainty avoidance* and *masculinity* are coupled with the elements of contrasting religious, linguistic and cultural tenets of the students and the professors (Cronje, 2007). Such elements significantly affected the classroom dynamic in variety of ways such as curriculum readjustment, use of relevant experience, materials classroom management and ability and inability to create an atmosphere of 'mutual trust'. (Cronje, 2007).

3. METHODS

This research of mixed methods began by exploring the quantitative data of IELTS which has a breakdown of each nationality's scores across the four disciplines of Reading Writing, Listening and Speaking. These results were held side by side with the qualitative data received from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in the spring of 2011 with 7 teachers of tertiary-level education in the UAE. The IELTS scores serve to either support or contend the responses given by the participants as to the tendencies of their students. For example, further validity can be ascribed to a respondent's approach which has an emphasis on reading with Qataris as the Qatari IELTS Reading average is 4.6, well below the global average. It is here that the quantitative data is used to support that qualitative data. Each volunteer interviewee was provided a set of 12 questions to ponder prior to the interview as well as an abstract of this exploratory study. **(see Appendix A).**

3.1 - The Participants

The participants were chosen based on backgrounds and experience in juxtaposing regions of the world. The aim of the study was secondly to gather information and experience from various areas of the world but primarily to gain insight into regions with contrasting values, belief systems, goals and study practices from a cultural perspective coupled with contrasting linguistic abilities such as perceived levels of mastery across all four disciplines.

Also looked at were issues related to classroom management, use or avoidance of socio-cultural materials (i.e. music, photos, films etc.) and linguistic tendencies of students' L1 and their effect on the students' abilities in English. All of this information was, in effect, 'bounced off of' the participants' experiences, perceptions, practices and approaches of teaching Emirati students in the UAE. It should be noted that all participants were interviewed on their experience teaching adults of a minimum age of 18 years.

The participants all hold Masters Degrees in TESOL, Linguistics or Applied Linguistics and have teaching experience ranging from 12 to 27 years. Each participant's interview was recorded and consent forms were signed allowing their responses to be part of the qualitative data of this study. Pseudonyms are used for each.

Bob, an American national had taught in the South East Asia (Indonesia and Thailand) in higher education for over 6 years, Taiwan as a teacher trainer for 7 years before coming to the Gulf where he has been for the last 12 years both in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Yasemin, a Turkish national taught in Turkey university systems for 17 years before coming to the UAE 7 years ago. Gary, an American has experience teaching college students in Poland for 2 years and then moving onto a Taiwanese university for 5 years previous to teaching Emirati

students for the last 2 years. Murphy, A UK national spent 7 years teaching undergrad students in Spain before coming to the Gulf where he's taught both Saudis and Emiratis for the last 14 years.   From Canada is Adrian who taught both secondary and tertiary students in Japan for 9 years before coming to in the Emirates where he has been for over 3 years. Janet, a British national, taught multi-national classes consisting mainly of Europeans in the UK and the US for 21 years prior to teaching Arab students for the last 2 years. Finally Charlie, another Briton, taught for 11 years in Zimbabwe and Swaziland and then moved onto the Gulf where Jordanians and Emiratis have been his students for the last 4 years.

3.2 - Reflections on Experience

Here the participants reported perceptions of students' different strengths, weakness, academic tendencies, linguistics trends and patterns of their L1s and how they present themselves in their L2s. Also discussed are how a culture or nation's education system works and therefore how the teachers make assumptions as to the teaching approaches the students have been exposed and are used to. Through all of the things, therefore, we are able to have a clearer picture as to how to approach a culture's student population.

3.3 - Approaches in East Asia

Having taught in South East Asia and East Asia, Bob draws many distinctions between the approaches he took to his classes based on the direct experience he gained of the native culture. "Playful and fun" classes were deemed most appropriate for his Thai students as they most complemented the relaxed demeanor of his students. It also helped to lower what Krashen calls the "affective filter" and other social boundaries that exist between himself and his students in the early days of a course (Krashen, 1982). "Once you lowered that boundary, what you found was ego permeability and risk-taking emerge from the students". Many of his lessons consisted of competitions, games and communicative activities to aid this process. Although not wishing to overgeneralize South East Asian students, he stated that his experience led him to perceive them as having the mindset of English education as play, language as communication but a necessity to fully acquire the intricacies of grammar, reading and writing not a main priority. Part of this, says Bob, is due to the fact that households have fewer books and less reading happens day to day than in other cultures. Language is a communicative tool in more of a verbal way. Bob states that he, in fact, played to their strengths in class by offering speaking and listening tasks more often and designing his lessons around the playful and relaxed atmosphere the students were accustomed to. This, he says, allowed the tone and environment to be less tame and hence more risk taking occurred. He did not, however, used rote memorization which the students' education system had leaned upon in the teaching of the L1 in primary and secondary levels.

He contrasts his approach in Thailand to his lessons in Taiwan where in general, there is a greater motivation both instrumental and integrative to learn and a greater respect for the idea of knowledge. A tenant held by many of his Taiwanese student was "learning for the sake of learning" and this allowed him to approach his classes with a heighten sense of academic rigor both to achieve the desired learning outcomes and to establish himself as an competent educator in the eyes of the students. He was regularly "tested" by the students on his knowledge of the

rules of the subject matter. According to Bob, students were very concerned about not only learning but mastering the rules of grammar, writing and listening strategies in efforts to gain the ability to "control the language" which he says is the ultimate goal of the Taiwanese student.

The idea of saving face both to the student and the teacher played an integral role in the ways his classes unfolded. Bob's account resonates with the Confucian notions described by Ng (2007). The students asked questions, asked for clarification and asked for guidance both to gauge the quality of the teacher and also to refine their skills to make themselves the ones with linguistic control of the English language. Therefore, Bob found that his approach was to be "well-prepared and serious" in his classes.

It is clear that misconceptions of the 'passive Asian learner' have been challenged through these accounts. Elements of active learning and questioning among both Gary and Bob's Taiwanese students seem to be, at times, at the forefront of their learning experience and their approach to the subject matter.

Regarding Mandarin Chinese as an L1, both Bob and Gary cite the initial rote methods of learning as the preferred method of their students. Writing and Reading were cited as perceived strengths by both men as a result of both the lofty pedestal the idea of knowledge is placed upon and also the fundamentals of Mandarin Chinese language which is, according to them, tonal, less complex grammatically than English and was observed by them to be learned by rote memorization due to the complexity of the writing system. In that way, their native language and how they learned their native language affects how they learn, or at least expected to learn a second language. Both Gary and Bob cited speaking competency as a weakness of their Taiwanese students. Again, the affective filter which Bob says dropped in his Southeast Asian students was more strict and the students were more apprehensive to speak. Gary presumes this is, again, related to the avoidance of losing face in front of their peers. He combatted this attempting, though not always successfully, to create an atmosphere of comfort in the class as well as model his attempts to speak words and phrases in Mandarin Chinese to ease the mood and show his students that making mistakes is acceptable in a language classroom.

Many of the same themes emerged when interviewing Adrian, a Canadian with 9 years of experience with Japanese students. Although he noted the students' familiarity with the English language and "solid background" in exposure, the challenge as a teacher was that, according to him, they "had trouble using it." After his mentioning of the perceived taciturn disposition of students and how getting them to speak and participate stood out as the primary challenge in his language classroom, I inquired further. He mentioned that the Confucian basis of the culture also lent itself to the idea that being quiet, docile and shy was "not a detriment" to a student's performance or image. The question was posed to Adrian that although it was a given that both the factors of Confucian silence and difficulty in mastering English were the driving forces behind this educational dilemma (especially in a language classroom), which one he would attribute the issue more to. He responded that his experience leads his answer toward the former. He went on add that he somehow knew that his students were capable of more English than they were leading on.

The approach that he was instructed to utilize in Japanese Public School was that of the "Grammar Translation Method" in which a native Japanese speaker would translate all English passages to the students. In this way, the idea was that they would be able to make sense of the English presented to the through the filter of their own L1. Upon working at a private institution, he was allowed to try a more "communicative approach" which he said due to the aforementioned attributes of his students both culturally and academically, presented yet another challenge.

3.4 - Approaches in Europe

Turning to teaching in a European classroom, Murphy taught young adults in the Basque country of Spain for seven years. Having completed his RSA/ Cambridge DELTA he cites the communicative approach to teaching as what seemed to produce the best results. Speaking in a general sense, he mentioned that his students were quite verbal and getting them to talk was never a problem in his classes. Reading ability was also cited as an academic strong point. He attributes these perceived strength to Spanish culture and the fact that Spanish being a Latinate language, their L1 offered ease to a certain extent in making connections with English. This, coupled with what he described as "good general knowledge" meant that students were quite keen to discuss topics. For example, having the students get into groups and discuss a vocabulary item before doing an academic reading on the subject was a usual start to vocabulary-building exercises.   Their willingness to speak is part of their culture according to Murphy. However their motivation was more in line with levels of fluency not accuracy. In general, Murphy says, the communicative approach gave them ample opportunity to use the base of the English language but did not always provide enough opportunities for him to give feedback and provide error correction.

Janet, who also holds a CELTA found the communicative tenets of this certification to fit her European students as well. What also worked was an approach she says she learned teaching in the United States of WIPPEA (Warm-up, Introduction, Presentation, Practice, Evaluation, Application).   Her approach generally involved much group work, pair work and a whole gamut of communicative activities. She and Murphy both cited "strong study skills" as one of the strengths of their European students. Janet goes further and would possibly agree with Hofstede in that a high level of individualism was a contributing factor to language learning (Hofstede, 1986). She reflected on her European students as not being so dependent on the teacher and were quite happy to seek out and find answers to questions and clarification. This led her approach to be one of closer to a facilitator than a lecturer.

Another interesting notion that Janet mentions regarding multi-national classes she taught in the United States involves her approach and use of the *culture* to jump start in-class discussion. Something that we have all used in our classes is to use the idea of national culture to spawn communication and interaction. She notes these as opportunities that presented themselves regularly to not only utilize the idea of communication but allow for cultural exchange to further the necessity and practicality of language learning as a social instrument. Her perceptions also echoed what Atkinson found in his study that the notion of 'interpersonal harmony' is not only held in high regard in Asian cultures but also amongst her European students (Atkinson, 1999).

3.5 - Approaches in Turkey

"Every culture and every nation has a different way of learning." This quote comes from Yasemin, a Turkish national who taught Turkish students for 17 years at the university level. What she found was her students' learning style had a great emphasis on learning vocabulary which she cites has an academic strength of her Turkish students. The detail-oriented nature of her students forced much of her lesson planning to include grammar practice which although may not have been a strength of her students, was an aspect of language learning in which they needed the most help. As she explains it, a large amount of English grammar is completely backwards to that of Turkish, a language which posits its subjects at the ending and as a suffix of the verb. The Turkish language not being a highly globalized language leads students to the realization that if any career or business is to be had outside of Turkey, English is a necessity which cannot be compromised and therefore leads them, generally, to high levels of motivation in English education.

Speaking and pronunciation are cited as two of her Turkish students' weaknesses. She attributes this to a general sense of fear amongst the students of making mistakes. In turn, whereas the students' reading ability might be at an advanced level due to the vast familiarity with the vocabulary used, once asked to verbally report on the given passages as a way of concept checking, this stage Yasemin says is when "the fear steps in". Yasemin's general approach was to attempt to use the strengths (grammar and vocabulary) to improve the weakness (spoken communication).

3.6 - Approaches in the United Arab Emirates

As mentioned, all 7 of the teachers and myself are currently teaching the tertiary level in the UAE. Participants gave the aforementioned results separately from the ensuing data. Distinctions were made between the approaches and pedagogy of the previous experience and that of the contemporary practices with Emirati students. Considering the learning style, tendencies, misuses, strengths, weaknesses, Arabic as an L1 as well as all other socio-cultural aspects of Emirati students, the following data were collected.

Every single participant cited their Emirati students' verbal communicative ability as an academic strength. Some used this skill to approach classes in a verbal way. Adrian reports that his students rarely have trouble getting meaning across verbally yet do have difficulty in transferring that ability to a written form. In agreement, a technique that I have used to try to apply the students' strengths to aid their weakness is to give a pair of students a topic and have one students speak the words which make up the essay and have the partner write down the words. Issues of mechanics may hinder the overall final product of the essay but in general I found that when students are allowed to use their verbal skills, they enhance their overall performance in an essay-writing task. Murphy goes on to say that the Emirati students pronunciation skills do not impede or interfere with the comprehension of the receiver. This is a sign of historic culture according to many of the respondents saying that Arabic lore, history and even modern uses of communication are verbal activities and therefore transferring this expressive ability comes second nature to their students. Therefore, their students in general, are open to communicate with their teacher as opposed to other cultures where this may is a point of

issue and problems go unresolved due to lack of teacher awareness. Murphy also mentioned students' acute ability and preferred learning style of memorization and rote learning as a factor is designing his approach to teaching. Spelling tests and direct translation methods are utilized in his classrooms.

All of the participants hold RSA/Cambridge CELTA certificates. However when asked whether they exploit these methods, namely the communicative method with their students, all responded that they do not. According to Adrian the methods of CELTA are "not as effective [with Arab students] and require a high degree of cooperation. Here it's just not realistic, it's idealistic". Bob concurs saying that he uses group and pair work less and less due to the fact that these techniques make it more difficult to keep the students' focus and that the more leeway he gives the students, the more socialization in Arabic happens.

Non-content material is also a facet of the classroom approach that is employed by many of the participants. Considering the perceived, lack of background knowledge on a number of subjects, Bob finds that much of the education that students receive from his class are more about the world than the English language. Murphy echoes this sentiment when saying that when he has students do a writing activity, he must choose topics that are highly familiar and known in order to have students produce rich content in their essays. He says that only in the 2nd or 3rd year of their tertiary education can a teacher introduce the notion of critical thinking into the classroom and in some instances his students are "living in a bubble".

Conversely and again, every participant cited the skills of reading and writing to be the most prominent weakness in their Emirati students. In turn, responses between 50% and 75% of class time are devoted to employing practice, techniques and strategies to improve their students writing skills. But this speaks further to the notion of imposing a Western-style education on Arab students. We demand student proficiency in English reading ability yet most respondents argued that reading is not a regularly-practiced activity even in the students' L1. Apart from reading the Holy Quran and having it being read to them, very little reading goes on in day-to-day lives of their students. So in this way, expecting or even hoping for them to excel in this skill in a second language seems a lofty aspiration.

Also included in the participants' approach to teaching Emirati students was the immediate necessity to guide them toward proper study habits, skills and practices. Students seem ill-equipped to conduct academic projects, study effectively for an exam and manage time when studying or taking an exam according to more than a few participants. Many respondents point to the secondary education level as a failure to produce students with the proper tools to handle the rigors of tertiary education. Murphy explains,

> To try to instill a sense of learning culture into students who have had none of that until the age of 18 and then suddenly be able to do that overnight is impractical.

Yasemin spends much the early part of a course establishing ground rules on "how to be a student" which include heightens levels of responsibility and academic accountability. As well, basic behavioral issues arise in most classes. Adrian mentioned classroom management techniques such as moving students around, stopping class entirely and waiting for the students to stop speaking before he can continue. According to many participants, this can be a daily

struggle. Murphy says classroom management spans from at the very best "constant monitoring" to the worst "crowd control". All of these factors considered, on top of the low levels of English language ability provide adequate reason for a "Foundations Program" which many institutions of higher learning in the Gulf rely on to prepare students for the challenge of a Bachelor's or Diploma program.

3.7 - Analysis of Quantitative Data

The quantitative data were taken from the IELTS website which breaks down the scores of test takers of both the Academic IELTS tests taken (73.8%) as well as the General Training IELTS (26.2%). As the qualitative data were reflective of academic experiences with the given students, only data from the Academic IELTS from the year 2010 were analyzed.

Regarding reading, Murphy's accounts were consistent with the data, as Spanish students scored on average a 6.9 in the reading section, figure of nearly a full band higher than the overall average of 6.0 worldwide (IELTS, 2010). Taiwanese students who both Bob and Gary profess to have a high regard and practice for reading took the IELTS in a different alphabet and scored just below the mean at 5.9 (IELTS, 2010). Emiratis, who have been cited as non-readers by scores of their teachers averaged a 4.9 IELTS band for reading and a 4.7 for writing, both over a band lower than the worldwide average (IELTS, 2010). However, when verbal communication skills were analyzed, the data show that the Emirates improved to a 5.4 band, just below the 5.8 average whilst the Taiwanese dipped slightly to a 5.8 (IELTS, 2010). Spanish student topped the selected list with a 6.5 IELTS Speaking band which stands consistent with Murphy's experiences (IELTS, 2010).

3.8 Materials

Included in the interviewed teachers' approach were the socio-cultural materials that were chosen for lesson plans. As language teachers, elements of culture can be best exemplified through media of videos, magazines, photography and topic discussion. When probed about what materials were used, follow-up was performed to each participant regarding what materials and topics were not used for a variety of reasons. Often times, we all wish to use certain topics to spark discussion in our classes. If the objective of the given lesson is to be a discussion or debate, a language teacher will often raise a topic which he or she knows will create one and often times and passionate one. Nothing gets students talking like inquiry into their own selves, country, culture or opinion. However, as my mentor once told me upon moving to the Middle East "err on the side of caution" which I found not only to apply to the Gulf but I found was a universal consideration in many parts of the world.

In European classes, politics served at the center point for areas in which alternatives were sought out. Murphy, who taught in the Basque country of Spain avoided Basque politics at all costs due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Janet cites the breakup of former Yugoslavia as a topic that invoked passions exceeding what was needed for the language classroom. Bob circumvented any discussion of the Thai Royal Family in his classes as well as any material that showed too much female skin. Later in his career, he learned to not include discussion topics of Taiwanese citizens vs. Taiwanese of Han or Chinese origin.

In the UAE world, the lists expounded all of these. Although not explicitly instructed to do so, in my experience, many of the respondents answered similarly when questioned about the materials which were not used in the classroom. Common responses included anything with nudity, sexual content, all materials involving matters of love or dating, alcohol, kissing or human rights. Many of us have encountered a text by published by Headway called "Headway Plus" which is tailored and censored for the Middle East. In Headway Plus, language such as "my girlfriend" is changed to "my sister" and "going to the pub" is used in place of "going to the cinema" (Soars & Soars, 2010). Other changes include Arabic names inserted as well as the omission of revealing photos of beach attire and evening wear.

4. CONCLUSION

I am reminded that the aforementioned data are only accounts of teachers' perceptions. It is worth noting that the participants' accounts cannot be held as absolute truth, that there quite possibly could be misunderstandings amongst the teachers as to their students' abilities, study habits, motivations and preferred style. I, as a researcher, am at a further remove having only inquired about them. However, considering these vastly different approaches to teaching in scattered points on a wide spectrum of regions, my contention here is that there is no one preferred or more effective way to approach language learning. Cultural and religious significances, placed upon previous learning styles and experiences, forced these teachers and myself to utilize differing methods, pedagogies and approaches to tailor our courses and content to the best fit the needs, outcomes, tendencies, strengths and weakness of our given students. Stating that there is no substitute for experience has never rung truer than in approaches to language teaching in varied cultures, regions and to students of varied L1s. Teaching credentials such as the RSA/Cambridge CELTA hold a multitude of positive practices which cater to retention and discovery of language. However they hold these tenants to be most effective in areas of teaching where cooperation and motivation are at high levels which are elements that cannot be counted upon to exist in all parts of the world. Therefore, it is my contention that although the CELTA may be regarded by many to be the preeminent English Language teaching credential, it may not always be appropriate, suitable or effective in all arenas of academic language learning.

Certain training courses, certifications and standard methodologies can be employed with regards to the target culture it is meant for. Consideration must be heeded in employing these standards of language learning to all cultures, regions and students of all L1s. There should be more. There should be refinement and development in these practices to adequately provide the optimum and effective outcomes in a teaching classroom. Without explicitly said or known, all of these teachers as well as myself have made this transition and will continue to make further adjustments as necessity demands to provide an energy, sensitivity and focus in our language classrooms which include an appropriateness to all facets of culture, L1s and learning styles.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

The following questions are in regards to teaching practices and approaches in varying cultures and nations. Depending on where you previously taught, the terms Culture X and Culture Y and possibly Culture Z will apply for example, Culture X (France), Culture Y (Thailand) and Culture Z (the UAE).

1) Tell me about teaching in Culture X. Who did you teach and what kind of institution was it?
2) Broadly, what were the academic strengths and weaknesses of these students? How did you use each? On which did you focus more?
3) What would you say are the greatest strengths and weakness of your Emirati students? How do you use each? On which do you focus more?
4) What approaches did you find most affective in Culture X? How does that differ from the approach you have with your Emirati students? What do you find to be most effective here?
5) How have your teaching practices changed since you started teaching in the Gulf?
6) What socio-cultural materials did you use in Culture X? Would you use those same materials in the Gulf? Why or why not?
7) Tell me about classroom management in Culture X and also here in the Gulf.
8) What contrasting tendencies of misuse of English have you found in Cultures X,Y (and Z)?

9) Where did/do you find most of your students learn?

10) When faced with difficulty in achieving the planned outcomes for a given lesson, how did/do you combat this in Cultures X, Y (and Z)?

Appendix B – Quantitative Data

(taken from ielts.org)

IELTS - Home > **Researchers** > **Analysis of test data** > **Test taker performance 2010**
IELTS | Researchers - Test taker performance 2010

Band score information
IELTS is assessed on a 9-band scale and reports scores both overall and by individual skill. Overall band scores for Academic and General Training candidates in 2010 are shown here together with scores for individual skills according to a variety of classifications. These figures are broadly in line with statistics for previous years.
N.B. for place of origin and first language, the tables show the top 40 places and languages, listed alphabetically, not in order of the size of the candidature.
Academic and General Training candidates
The following table shows the split between the Academic and General Training candidature in 2010.

	2010
Academic	73.8%
General Training	26.2%

Gender
These figures show the mean overall and individual band scores achieved by 2010 Academic and General Training candidates according to their gender.

Mean band scores for female candidates					
	Listening	**Reading**	**Writing**	**Speaking**	**OVERALL**
Academic	6.1	6.1	5.6	5.9	6
General Training	6.2	5.8	5.9	6.3	6.1

Mean band scores for male candidates					
	Listening	**Reading**	**Writing**	**Speaking**	**OVERALL**
Academic	5.9	5.9	5.4	5.8	5.8
General Training	6.2	5.8	5.8	6.2	6.1

Place of Origin
These figures show the mean overall and individual band scores achieved by 2010 Academic and General Training candidates from the top 40 places of origin.

Mean band score for the most frequent countries or regions of origin (Academic)					
Academic	**Listening**	**Reading**	**Writing**	**Speaking**	**OVERALL**

Academic	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	OVERALL
Bangladesh	5.8	5.6	5.5	5.8	5.7
Brazil	6.8	6.9	6.2	6.8	6.7
China (Peoples Republic)	5.7	5.9	5.2	5.3	5.6
Colombia	6.3	6.5	5.7	6.4	6.3
Cyprus	6.4	5.9	5.7	6.3	6.1
Egypt	6.3	6.1	5.8	6.3	6.2
France	6.9	7.2	6	6.4	6.7
Germany	7.5	7.3	6.5	7.2	7.2
Greece	7.2	7	6.1	6.5	6.8
Hong Kong	6.8	6.7	5.8	6	6.4
India	6.3	5.8	5.7	6	6
Indonesia	6.3	6.4	5.6	6	6.2
Iran	5.8	5.7	5.7	6.3	6
Iraq	5.7	5.5	5.3	6.2	5.7
Italy	6.4	7	5.8	6.3	6.4
Japan	6	6	5.3	5.7	5.8
Jordan	5.7	5.5	5.2	5.9	5.6
Kazakhstan	5.8	5.9	5.6	6	5.9
Korea, South	6.1	6.1	5.3	5.7	5.9
Kuwait	5.3	5	4.9	5.7	5.3
Libya	5.2	5.1	5.1	5.8	5.4
Malaysia	7.2	7	6.2	6.6	6.8
Mexico	6.5	6.7	5.9	6.4	6.4
Myanmar	6.2	6.2	5.7	6	6.1
Nepal	6.3	5.8	5.7	5.9	6
Nigeria	6.2	6.1	6.3	7.1	6.5
Oman	5.1	5	4.9	5.6	5.2
Pakistan	5.9	5.7	5.8	6.1	5.9
Philippines	7	6.6	6.2	6.8	6.7
Qatar	4.8	4.6	4.5	5.3	4.9
Russia	6.6	6.6	5.9	6.6	6.5
Saudi Arabia	5	4.9	4.7	5.7	5.1
Spain	6.6	6.9	6	6.4	6.5
Sri Lanka	6.4	6	5.9	6.4	6.3

Academic	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	OVERALL
Sudan	5.8	5.7	5.6	6.2	5.9
Taiwan	5.8	5.9	5.4	5.8	5.8
Thailand	5.9	5.9	5.3	5.8	5.8
Turkey	6	6	5.5	6	5.9
United Arab Emirates	5	4.8	4.7	5.4	5.1