

Middle Eastern Students at LTUIC: some findings on “signals” and perceptions of respect/disrespect.

If a learner builds up trust in their teacher, then learning can be facilitated more easily, and trust is easier to negotiate if there is respect on both sides. Trust breaks down if either party perceives “disrespect”.

Saudi Arabian Culture – Key Concepts and Values

- **Face** – In a culture where confrontation and conflict are to be avoided, the concept of face is a fundamental issue of daily life. **Dignity and respect are key elements** in Saudi Arabian culture and saving face, through the use of compromise, patience and self-control is a means by which to maintain these qualities. Arabian culture utilises the concept of face to solve conflicts and **avoid embarrassing or discomforting others**. In a business context, preventing loss of face is equally important. For instance, your Saudi Arabian counterparts will not take well to pressure that places them in an uncomfortable position which make them lose face.
- **Islam** – In order to comprehend fully the culture of Saudi Arabia one needs to understand the extensive influence of religion on society. The overwhelming majority of the population of Saudi Arabia are Arabs who adhere to the Wahhabi sect of Islam. Islam, which governs every aspect of a Muslim's life, also permeates every aspect of the Saudi state. As a result, Arabian culture is often described as detail orientated, whereby emphasis is placed on ethics and expected social behaviour such as **generosity, respect and solidarity**. These are customs and social duties that also infiltrate the Saudi Arabian business world and affect the way Arabs handle business dealings.

Saudi Arabian Culture – Key Concepts and Values

- **High Context Communication** - Saudi Arabia is considered a very high context culture. This means that the message people are trying to convey often relies heavily on other communicative cues such as body language and eye-contact rather than direct words. In this respect, people make assumptions about what is not said. In Saudi Arabian culture particular emphasis is placed on tone of voice, the use of silence, facial cues, and body language.
- Age plays a significant part in the culture of Saudi Arabia. For this reason, greater **respect** must be shown to elders at all times.
- Maintain strong eye-contact with Saudis during a conversation and expect a closer distance during conversation in both business and social settings. Both forms of communication are ways in which to strengthen trust and show **respect**.

What is trust?

Trust is a positive expectation that another will not-through words, actions or decisions-act opportunistically.

Five key dimensions that underlie the concept of trust:

- Integrity: honesty and truthfulness
- Competence: technical and interpersonal knowledge and skills
- Consistency: reliability, predictability and good judgement in handling situations
- Loyalty: willingness to protect and save face for another person
- Openness: giving the full truth

Why is there focus on this topic?

There is perception amongst some staff members and students that they are not respected, and also that Middle Eastern students do not show respect towards their peers.

- Qualitative: interviews with teachers and Arabic Advisor
- Short questionnaire to 30+ Middle Eastern students
- Findings summarised

Teachers' complaints	Students' explanations
Students come late to class at the start after break or after prayers	Family/religious commitments and finding suitable accommodation are the causes of this. Teachers should be more understanding.
Answer calls on their mobile phones in class.	Calls are urgent requests from wives about children. These can not be ignored or avoided.
Speak in their own language.	We translate concepts/ideas to understand them better.
Copy homework and assignments from past students and one another.	To pass the first time is absolutely vital for a sponsored student.
Take pictures of tests with mobile phones.	If teachers are negligent, students will take advantage.
Use derogatory vocabulary to describe staff and peers.	These are adjectives only and should be taken with non-emotive connotation.
Complaints to Director without discussions with teachers or student advisors.	Levels at placement and early completion of ELICOS are very important and Director has most power to exert.

Note: 5 teachers said that they have had no problems as such with Middle Eastern students.

Signals of “disrespect”

Students' complaints	Teachers' comments
Teachers show anger/frustration	What's wrong with being expressive to make a strong point?
Dress code especially of female teachers in summer.	There is no prescribed dress code.
Teachers, especially females, smoking with students.	This is a free country.
Organising barbeques or excursions to restaurants during Ramadan.	These are decided by Needs Analysis. Choice of the majority of students in the class.
Organising get-togethers without halal food provided.	Vegetarian options are always there.
Teachers do not organise make-up classes for lessons missed during prayer time.	Students should come on time or find out for themselves (from peers).

Note: 3 students stated that not only teachers but 80 to 90% of Australians are rude and unpleasant, especially the young commuters on public transport.
 One student said that he did not experience “disrespect” in USA (as he did in Australia) and that he wished to return to study in the States.

Conclusions

- Mismatch between perceptions of students about teachers and expectations of teachers about students' awareness of western conventions.
- Values may not be very different eg: both groups value respect
- But the signals (of communication) are a cause of misunderstanding
- Connotations and nuances of language are important for clear communication

There should be:

- A robust program of learning (or raising of awareness) of western conventions, pragmatics, life etc for students before placement in classes.
- Professional development sessions on how to create inter-cultural classrooms.
- Cross-cultural learning for staff and students.

- Creation of inter-cultural classrooms can only happen if teachers have high awareness about the backgrounds and cultures of their students.
- Managers/Directors Of Studies have a strong duty of care towards the teachers to provide this information to the teachers.

Quranic verses

49: 11 "O' you who believe! Let not a group scoff at another group, it may be that the latter are better than the former; nor let (some) women scoff at other women, it may be that the latter are better than the former; nor defame one another, nor insult one another by nicknames.

How bad is it, to insult one's brother after having faith.

And whoever does not repent, then such are indeed wrong-doers "And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. And that you be dutiful to your parents. If one of them or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor shout at them but address them in terms of honor." [17:23] [O humankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know and deal with each other in kindness (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God (is he who is) the most righteous of you, and God is Knower, Aware.] (Al-Hujurat 49:13)

Hadith:

On one occasion the funeral procession of a Jew passed before the Prophet; he stood up as a sign of respect for the deceased. "Why did you stand up for a Jewish funeral?" he was asked. The Prophet replied: "Is it not a human soul?" (Al-Bukhari)