

Understanding Arab Students

Susan Matson, ELS Language Centers

Mark Algren, University of Kansas

Editor's note: Instead of the standard book review format, Matson and Algren have reviewed Nydell's book, extracted relevant cultural traits, and applied them to the IEP setting.

A Growing Need for Awareness

Recently, many intensive English programs (IEPs) throughout the United States have been inundated with Saudi students. From 2001-2005, due to either a real or perceived hiatus on visa issuance for students from the seventeen Arab countries in the aftermath of 9/11, the enrollment of Arabs in American IEPs slowed to a trickle, or in some cases, stopped altogether. However, university-sponsored and proprietary IEP programs finally started to see real enrollment recovery late in 2005 and early this year due to the unanticipated windfall of the Saudi Cultural Mission Scholarship program which expects to have disbursed up to 10,000 scholarships by the end of 2006. Numbers have not yet been released for 2007, but projections are optimistic that the Saudis will keep coming for at least the next two years.

The extraordinary influx of students means major logistical and curricular accommodations have to be made. IEPs must provide more services, ranging from homestays and dorm space to textbook stocks, not to mention teachers, of which there suddenly seems to be a shortage. Curricula and approaches to teaching have been affected, too. A number of programs closed after 9/11, and surviving programs depended on Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese enrollments. As a result, some IEP programs shifted to accommodate a cultural profile of students who typically arrived with a long tradition of learning through reading and writing.

Since the incoming Arab students have a tradition of learning through speaking and listening, new challenges have arisen. Certainly most are

motivated and cooperative. They've been eager to speak in conversation-based classes and make highly valued contributions. However, they are hampered in part by a lack of strong reading/writing skills.

Culturally based behaviors, both in and outside of the classroom, sometimes puzzle teachers. Arab students seem inclined to negotiate excessively for grades, especially when they are in danger of failing. They seem prone to helping friends on assignments and quizzes to the extent that might be considered cheating by their teachers. They appear to think that rules and regulations are more flexible than they are. If Arab students have made friends with influential persons on campus, they may appeal to those people for help or special dispensation in classroom matters. Simple debates in conversation class can be far more passionate than teachers are accustomed to dealing with. And with at least some Arab students, there are issues with tardiness and absenteeism. When these behaviors occur frequently and their causes are not fully understood, the essential trust that should bind students and educators is put at risk. What's an IEP to do?

Understanding Arab Cultural Behavior

Increasingly, IEPs are turning to Arab-specific treatises such as *Understanding Arabs: A Guide for Modern Times* (Margaret Nydell, Boston: Intercultural Press, Fourth edition) to shed light on Arab culture and how it affects classroom behavior. The latest version is an update of her popular 1988 book. The particular advantage of the 2006 imprint is a new introduction in which the author movingly refers to 9/11. In it, Nydell recounts leaving downtown Washington on the day of the attacks and personally commiserating with a Pakistani Muslim taxi driver who was deeply sympathetic to the

victims. It is clear that she understands the experience of Americans and also the Arab mindset.

Here, Nydell takes care to straighten out the common American confusion over labels such as *Arab* (referring to all nations where Arabic is the primary spoken language) and *Muslim* (referring to all worshippers of Islam regardless of country of origin). She also refutes inflammatory political statements based on popular misconceptions. It is essential for all educators working with Arabs to understand the political ramifications of the 9/11 attacks and to appreciate, at a visceral level, that Arab students come to us in trust to be educated. These students separate the actions of the US government from Americans in general and do not, as a group, come with a predetermined political agenda. Nydell, a pre-eminent Middle Eastern specialist with extensive travel throughout the Arab world and fluency in a range of Arabic dialects, is well prepared to explain these issues. She does so simply, clearly, and without prejudice or bias.

Cultural Differences

For these reasons alone, the book is worth a place on any IEP resource shelf, and it is recommended reading for teachers who haven't taught Arabs before. Nydell's descriptions and recommendations are intended to be practical, and she shows special acuity in describing cultural traits as observed in Arab countries. For example, if you are a Canadian petroleum engineer in Cairo, should you arrive at a dinner party on time, or fashionably late? If you are a female support staffer in Yemen, should you arrive expecting to go out on the street fully covered? This book as a whole, and the last chapter in particular ("The Arab Countries: Similarities and Differences"), spells out these necessities of protocol.

Nydell doesn't stint on details of cultural differences. She ferrets out several core characteristics that are common to Arabs, as evidenced by her chapter titles:

- Introduction: Patterns of Change
- 1 Beliefs and Values
- 2 Friends and Strangers
- 3 Emotion and Logic
- 4 Getting Personal
- 5 Men and Women
- 6 Social Formalities and Etiquette
- 7 The Social Structure

- 8 The Role of the Family
- 9 Religion and Society
- 10 Communicating with Arabs
- 11 Islamic Fundamentalism
- 12 Anti-Americanism
- 13 Arabs and Muslims in the West
- 14 The Arab Countries: Similarities and Differences

The first ten chapters and Chapter 14 are especially useful to ESL instructors because they explicate the cultural traits that individuals are likely to carry with them into any setting. Chapters 11 and 12 help explain trends in attitudes rather than cultural traits. Chapter 13 provides a demographic description. Chapter 14 provides useful information about differences among the Middle Eastern countries.

Applicability to IEPs

Because Nydell's experience of Arabs has been almost exclusively in Arab countries and in business settings, some of the traits that she identifies may not be apropos to educational settings in the United States. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of material that is germane to the needs of IEPs. Instructors, in particular, need to know what to expect so that behaviors will not be interpreted as personalized responses to situations within the control of the instructor.

For example, if an Arab student dominates a classroom discussion while slighting others who try to respond, instructors will be more likely to realize it is (to Arabs) a non-offensive cultural trait (gregariousness in a public setting) rather than a display of discourtesy, manageable by establishing ground rules at the start of a course.

Here, then, are some of the traits which seem to be common to most Arabs as discussed in Nydell's book. Only broad strokes are presented here. We strongly recommend reading the book for enlightening details.

In Chapter One, Nydell discusses Arab beliefs and values, noting that these "determine their outlook on life and govern their social behavior" (p. 13). She acknowledges that she is making broad generalizations, but points out that while there is great diversity in "foods, manner of dress, housing, decorative arts, [and] governmental systems," there is still much homogeneity in their beliefs and values (p. 14).

Central to Arab thought is the belief that “many, if not most, things in life are controlled, ultimately, by fate rather than by humans; that everyone loves children; that wisdom increases with age; and that the inherent personalities of men and women are vastly different” (p. 13). Specific values which may influence classroom behavior include:

- ◆ It is important to behave at all times in a way that will create a good impression on others.
- ◆ A person’s dignity, honor, and reputation are of paramount importance, and no effort should be spared to protect them. Honor (or shame) is often viewed as collective, pertaining to the entire family or group.
- ◆ Loyalty to one’s family takes precedence over personal preferences.
- ◆ Social class and family background are the major determining factors of personal status, followed by individual character and achievement.
- ◆ Social morality standards should be maintained, through laws if necessary. (p. 15)

In Chapter Two, Nydell discusses friends and strangers. Here, we find that it is “*the duty of a friend to give help and do favors to the best of his or her ability*” (p. 17). No wonder that some students can’t resist trying to help their friends on quizzes. Further, “good manners require that one never openly refuse a request from a friend” (p. 17).

For example, after students feel that they have befriended an instructor, they may ask for favors, such as help gaining admission to a university. Observing the Arab concept of good manners, you should not bluntly refuse the request, even if the proposal seems absurd or unworkable. Nydell advises responding by expressing your good will and saying that you will do your best to try to accommodate the request. This is because “*an oral promise has its own value as a response*” (p. 18).

Later, when you let the students know that you cannot grant their requests, they will most likely be gracious and not ask for an explanation. It should be noted that if a student promises to do something for you, for example, to finish a project by a certain date, the student may be giving the answer you expect, but

the student will also understand that the “*Yes* should not always be taken literally” (p. 19). In fact, the student may append the phrase *Inshallah* (if God wills).

This may seem to a Westerner as a sort of hedge, but in the Arab’s mind, it is called for culturally (p. 19). Understanding a student’s thinking this way can be helpful in explaining to students how they need to adjust to the American university expectation of observing deadlines and keeping promises.

Criticism needs to be handled delicately. “It should be indirect and include praise of any good points first, accompanied by assurances of high regard for the individual. To preserve the person’s dignity, avoid criticism in front of others” (p. 24). Nydell gives the following example of a way to phrase constructive criticism: “You are doing excellent work here, and this is a good report. We need to revise a few things, however; let’s look at this again and work through it together, so we can make it even better.”

From time to time, a distressed student may send an intermediary to your office to plead on

his or her behalf. In this case, the intermediary is believed to know you well and therefore have the ability to influence you (having *wasta*). *Wasta* can work both ways. If you are having trouble with a particular student or group of students, you may be able to use a respected intermediary to solve the problem.

In Chapter Three, “Emotion and Logic,” we learn that for Arabs, subjectivity is highly valued while objectivity is sometimes suspect. As a result, you may sometimes see displays of emotion and personal feelings. To the Western mind, this may seem immature, but to the Arab, it is highly valued (p. 27). “Arabs consciously reserve the right to look at the world in a subjective way, particularly if a more objective assessment of a situation would bring to mind a more painful truth” (p. 28). An Arab would therefore be more inclined to skirt the obvious, then become “angry and defensive, insisting that the situation is not as you describe it” (p. 28).

Fatalism is an important part of traditional Arab thinking. It is founded on the belief that “God has

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direct and ultimate control of all that happens. If something goes wrong, people can absolve themselves of blame or can justify doing nothing to make improvements or changes by assigning the cause to God's will" (p. 28). To a Westerner, this may seem like a loophole or a way to avoid taking responsibility for one's actions.

The idea of fatalism is connected to the Arab subjective view of reality. "If Arabs feel that something threatens their personal dignity, they may be obliged to deny it, even in the face of facts to the contrary To Arabs, honor is more important than facts" (p. 29). In fact, Arabs are inclined to personalize everything in life. "*People are more important than rules*" (p. 31). "They have a long tradition of personal appeal to authorities for exception to rules They do not accept predetermined standards if these standards are a personal inconvenience." Predictably, then, some students will complain about being held back on the basis of low grades, and others may object to level placements based on testing.

Be prepared for seemingly excessive displays of emotion on certain issues. Negotiation and persuasion are highly developed skills in the Middle East, and are often accompanied by "verbal cleverness ... charm, applying personal pressure, engaging in personal appeals" (p. 31) and a great deal of emotion. Don't be put off by the latter. According to Nydell, "*Emotion connotes deep and sincere concern for the substance of the discussion*" (p. 31).

In Chapter Four, "Getting Personal," Nydell notes that "the concept of what constitutes personal behavior or a personal question is culturally determined, and there are marked differences between Westerners and Arabs" (p. 33). As an instructor, you will sometimes want to share information about yourself to establish rapport. For Arabs, questions about marital status or salary are not off limits as they are here, and you can redirect the conversation as needed. For your part, be sure to avoid asking about an Arab man's female relatives. It is better to ask about "the family" (p. 34). Similarly, don't be surprised if Arab men write only about male relatives in essays about family. Nydell says that you can "tell when you have brought up a sensitive subject when

[your student] evades a direct answer to your questions. If you receive evasive answers, don't press further" (p. 35).

Physical proximity is also culturally determined. Arabs tend to "stand and sit closer and to touch other people (of the same sex) more than Westerners do" (p. 35). People of the same sex also hold hands, and kissing on the cheeks is common. An Arab would prefer to sit next to a stranger in an otherwise empty room rather than take a seat some distance away. In the West, one has one's personal space as a sort of protective bubble around oneself, whereas an Arab can be much more open to noise input, touching and piercing gazes.

Chapter Five, discussing gender relationships in the context of honor, points out that Arab men and women are careful about public behavior between the sexes. "*Arabs quickly gain a negative impression if you behave with too much (presumed)*

familiarity toward a person of the opposite sex... . They will conclude that you are a person of low moral standards" (p. 44). Even

public displays of affection between married partners is offensive, or at least highly embarrassing, to Arabs (p. 45). In Arab countries, both men and women are expected to dress respectfully. In the West, the more liberal Arabs may tolerate women whose legs and arms are uncovered, but the more conservative may be offended.

As for social formalities, Chapter 6 points out that "*Good manners constitute the most salient factor in evaluating a person's character*" (p. 55). Above all, Arabs have a high regard for generosity. Stinginess and inhospitality are anathema. If you are invited to the home of one of your students, go with an empty stomach and expect to be doted on and plied with great quantities of food and drink. Always eat or drink at least a small amount, as it would be offensive to refuse, no matter how full you may be. It is the duty of a good host to offer seconds and thirds, sometimes rather insistently. Take what is offered, although you do not have to finish everything on your second plate. Be sure to lavish praise, admiration and gratitude for the food (p. 60). You will probably be offered coffee or tea; remember to receive and hold the cup with your right hand. If you plan to host Arab

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students at a dinner at your home, it would be wise to prepare far more food than can be eaten. Avoid serving pork (forbidden to Muslims), even as a separate dish. If you cook with alcohol, be sure to label the dishes that contain it as some will choose not to eat them. If you serve alcoholic beverages, provide non-alcoholic drinks, too (p. 62). In general, you are least likely to cause embarrassment or offense by simply avoiding pork and alcohol.

Chapter Seven deals with social structures, evidence of which you will probably not detect in academic situations. Chapter Eight explores the role of the family. The most important message in this chapter is the fact that “*Family loyalty and obligations take precedence over loyalty to friends or the demands of a job*” (p. 71). At school, this means that if the family needs something, the student is obliged to attend to it, even if it means missing class or being late. Family comes first.

Responsibility for the welfare of the family “rests heavily on older men in the extended family and on older sons in the immediate family” (p. 73). When a family member back home is in distress (ill or hospitalized, for example), some students will feel that they should stay at home to be 100% available to make or receive phone calls. This can also explain (sometimes) answering phones in class and then exiting to the hallway to talk. Arabs never speak disparagingly about their families, and would be “very surprised if someone talks about poverty and disadvantages experienced in early life” (p. 79) when such humble information need not be disclosed. Therefore, be very careful when you disclose facts about your family life. “If you do not have positive things to say about your family, things that will incline Arabs to admiration, it is best to avoid the subject” (p. 79).

Chapter Nine deals with religion and society. There is no room for non-believers, and Nydell advises, “If you have no religious affiliation or are an atheist, this should not be mentioned” (p. 81). Islam permeates all aspects of the Arab’s life. During the school year, it is likely that Ramadan will be observed. Muslims are required to fast from sun up to sun down. If afternoon or evening classes run late, time should be allowed for students to break their

fast. Although social custom and sometimes laws require non-Muslims in Arab countries to observe Ramadan requirements while in public, few students would expect similar observance by non-Muslims here. However, it would be tactful to avoid eating, drinking, or smoking in daylight hours in front of Muslim students, notably in one-on-one situations such as an office visit.

As language teachers, we are highly interested in communication. In Chapter Ten, Nydell sheds light on the Arabic language. She notes that Arabic writing is in Classical Arabic which, though it has “evolved into Modern Standard Arabic to accommodate new words and usages” (p. 94), is still considered sacred to Arabs. Because there are many dialects of Arabic, Classical (Modern Standard) Arabic can be interspersed into Colloquial Arabic to enable communication between Arabs from different regions. “It is not

an exaggeration to say that *Arabs are passionately in love with their language*” (p. 95). It is for them, after all, the language that God chose to reveal His message.

While difficult to master, it has many strengths, including the easy coining of new words (p. 95).

Of special interest to ESL writing and speaking instructors is the fact that “Eloquence is emphasized and admired in the Arab world far more than in the West” (p. 97). When Westerners read or hear long-winded, sometimes repetitious or somewhat emotional discourse, they fail to realize that to an Arab, “*how you say something is as important as what you have to say*” (p. 97). The Western pattern of hierarchical organization, with an introduction, thesis, logical sequence of topics supported by data and summed up in a conclusion doesn’t make much sense to an Arab, whose first priority is emotional impact. Conversely, if you, the Westerner, “speak softly and make your statements only once, Arabs may wonder if you really mean what you are saying” (p. 98). The lesson here is that to have an effect, repeat it several times and be consistent about the message.

Words have power. Because words are taken quite literally, “the use of curses and obscenities is very offensive to Arabs. If words have power and can affect events, it is feared that curses may bring

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misfortune just by being uttered” (p. 99). Arabs will avoid certain words for fear that the thing will become reality. Therefore, euphemisms are used as a kind of mutually understood code. For instance, an Arab would rather say that someone has “the disease” than to say that he has “cancer” or he is “a little tired” rather than that he has been seriously injured (p.100). The written word is highly respected. Words from the Qur’an are sacred, no matter where they are written. If a student writes a Qur’anic blessing at the top of his or her homework paper, it is advisable to handle that paper with respect. Don’t allow it to drop on the floor, set a drink on it, or erase it.

Behavior of Arab Students Abroad: A Survey

It should be noted that not all of these behaviors are always manifested when Arab students live abroad. Many Gulf Arab students come to the US with significant cultural information resulting from visits, hearsay, the media, or pre-departure orientations. While not all information is equally accurate, some ideas may lead students to modify customary behaviors. Alternatively, we reasoned, Arabs may, through observation or IEP orientation, learn quickly that some of their usual at-home behaviors (frequent public smoking without asking permission of a bystander, for example) are ill advised in the American setting.

The authors wanted to find out if many modifications in fact are taking place. If so, then Nydell’s conclusions may be questionable for US educators. In evaluating her work, it is important to avoid stereotyping either groups of students or individuals. Accordingly, the authors created a survey (available with the cover letter and statistics on the *ORTESOL Journal* Web site at <http://www.ortesol.org/>) parsed from *Understanding Arabs* to see which cultural traits listed by Nydell could be:

- ◆ reasonably expected to be observed in an educational (classroom or excursion) setting;
- ◆ reasonably be expected to be evident in the United States; or
- ◆ seen as either positive or negative, depending on the management capabilities of instructors and administrators.

Findings

The survey was distributed to the forty-two ELS Language Centers in the United States as well as to IEP instructors in the Applied English Center at the University of Kansas. Five traits were observed to a high degree by 94% or more of the respondents:

1. Friends have the duty to help friends (this could include helping friends with tests, papers, etc.).
2. People (and helping other people) are more important than rules and regulations.
3. Personal influence is a useful way of getting things done (in other words, getting someone to bend or circumvent the rules for me).
4. You should be able to modify any rule on the basis of compelling personal need.
5. Family obligations (for example, illness of a family member), means that you shouldn’t hold me to the rules on attendance.

Another six traits were observed to a moderate degree by 94% or more of the respondents.

6. A promise made has its own value, but people can’t always be held responsible for actual follow-through (i.e., I can promise to do something, but I can’t be held responsible if it doesn’t happen; maybe there were factors beyond my control.).
7. Any form of public criticism is a personal insult to honor.
8. The emotional impact of an event is just as important as the actual facts (facts may be denied as a way of saving face).
9. Stated times (class start time and the like) are flexible: lateness should not be an issue.
10. You should never speak ill of your family members or admit that you come from poor circumstances or a disadvantaged family.
11. The ability to speak well and at length is an important skill.

Implications

In all, our survey validated that the Arab cultural traits identified by Nydell in overseas and business settings are all exhibited to greater or lesser degrees in American educational settings. Some appear softened in a new and alien context (the US), but to a surprising extent appear to be constant. It is also

noteworthy that two respondents plus one of the authors, all with extensive work experience in the Middle East, observed: “if overseas, all of the traits are expressed!”

For these reasons, we recommend the use of *Understanding Arabs* as assigned and/or recommended reading in every IEP setting. Additionally, because members of a culture are often unaware or only vaguely aware of their own culture’s values and assumptions, we recommend reading books on American culture written for non-Americans, such as Gary Althen’s *American Ways*. A greater awareness of our own deeply-held values and beliefs will assist in making comparisons to Arab cultural traits and will be useful in devising ways to help Arab students understand and adapt to the new culture in which they are living.

The authors also recommend that IEP staff in programs with significant Arab populations take the time to discuss the implications of Nydell’s work, once it is widely read. We do know from experience that Arab students can be brought around to both an understanding and an appreciation of the values that underlie IEP conventions, rules and processes. Nydell’s work suggests ways for making that happen faster and more efficiently, so that everyone benefits. Some of them are:

- ◆ well-designed student orientations, with procedures explained both verbally and in writing;
 - ◆ at least a rudimentary understanding of key Arab-English differences (cf. Bernard Smith, “Arabic Speakers,” pp.195-213, in Swan & Smith);
 - ◆ the use of successfully adjusted Arabs to help broker thorny situations;
 - ◆ course descriptions with specific and non-negotiable guidelines for attendance and grades;
 - ◆ a willingness to keep an open door for discussions, but the ability to close discussions politely but firmly, after a decision has been made;
- ◆ consistency at all times in how policies are applied; and
 - ◆ a genuine and abiding interest in Arab students and their challenges.

Lastly, we recommend that you take the time to enjoy Arab students, their perspectives, and their values. Without question, 2006 and forward will provide rich opportunities to grow personally and professionally by means of this special population.

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Susan Matson (M.S., Education, Johns Hopkins; TEFL Certificate, American University) has taught ESL to over thirty nationalities and served as ex-USIA English Teaching Fellow (teacher-trainer) in Eastern Europe. As Director of Curriculum for ELS Language Centers, she develops materials for new programs, in-service development and cultural awareness.

Mark Algren is a Language Specialist at the Applied English Center, University of Kansas. He is a co-Sponsored Student Adviser. He spent 14 years teaching in and directing IEPs in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, recently at the American University of Sharjah. He served on the TESOL Board as convention chair for Baltimore 2003.