

Secrets of Success: Saudi Student Voices

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Introduction

In the fall of 2005, many intensive English programs were unexpectedly inundated with hundreds of applications from students in Saudi Arabia who wished to enter the United States in order to study English and then matriculate to U.S. colleges and universities. Consequently, schools across the United States found themselves educating and tending to the needs of unprecedented numbers of Saudi students. After some initial settling-in problems, some Saudi students were doing well while others were failing to thrive. In Saudi Arabia, students receive instruction from their teachers who deliver knowledge mostly via lectures. Students are expected to memorize the information. Grades depend solely on performance on final exams. Moreover, Saudi culture allows for negotiation: students know that if they plead with their instructors, they can be granted second chances or extra time to complete assignments. Given that some Saudi students adapt well to the culture of American classroom expectations whereas others fail, it is incumbent upon ESL instructors to consider the following questions:

- What strategies do Saudi students develop to succeed with their US studies?
- When these strategies are shared with peers, do they facilitate academic success?

In order to answer these questions, I embarked on a quest that included a series of interviews with 25 Saudi students over the period of a year. Of these 25 students, eight

were fully admitted into a university, eight were conditionally admitted to a university and were taking both English language and university courses, and nine were full-time English language students. Nineteen were undergraduates, and six were graduates. Seven were women. Each of these students had the chance to participate in a variety of interviews. As recommended by Stake (2000) and Gall, Gall, and Borg (2005) and for triangulation purposes, I conducted three types of interviews: semi-structured, photo-elicitation, and focus groups. In all, there were 61 individual interviews, six focus groups, and a grand total of 80 interactions between the students and myself. In addition, I kept a reflective journal, and I engaged in a series of on-going discussions of my findings, thoughts, and conclusions with my colleagues throughout the interview process and data analysis.

The Problem

At the time I began my research, there was a dearth of research about the Saudi experience in the U.S. and little was known of their strategies for succeeding in their new educational environment. While research has been conducted to understand the challenges and needs of international students in general (with Asian students as the central focus), little research has been undertaken to understand the Saudi Arabian experience. In addition, studies exist that determine how to support international students (again predominantly Asian students), yet there is little that focuses on Saudi Arabian students. While a sizeable sub-group of international students, Saudi students are under

-represented in investigations of international students. Inquiries have examined and described the educational system and environment in Saudi Arabia, and literature exists that investigates and portrays Saudi Arabian and Islamic culture, but very little has been done to capture the students' perceptions of how they are doing in the U.S. In addition, little is known about the success strategies Saudi students develop to reach their educational goals. Thus, there is an absence of Saudi students' voices about their experiences in the United States, the problems and challenges they face in their new educational environment, and the strategies they develop to succeed in their studies.

Literature

The literature that does exist is focused on international students. Studies that report on international students' perceptions and experiences tend to fall into two general types of studies. The older research (which was uniformly quantitative) tends to compartmentalize perceptions into general categories of problems. The later research is largely qualitative (and also tended to focus on problems) and includes student narratives to give voice to international student perceptions.

Not surprisingly, the literature on international students reports the problems and issues one would expect when studying in a different country, using a different language. Problems include difficulties associated with using English (Tompson & Tompson, 1960; Lin and Yi, 1997; Luzio-Lockett, 1998; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000; Qin & Lykes, 2006; and Li, Fox, & Almarza, 2007); perceptions of prejudice, racism, and discrimination in the U.S. (Lin and Yi, 1997;

Schmidtt, Spears, and Branscombe; 2003; Lee & Rice, 2007); adapting to a different culture and a new academic experience while under strong pressure to succeed (Hull, 1978); financial problems; lack of contact with Americans; loneliness, homesickness, depression; and issues with adjusting to a new climate, food, and language (Hull, 1978; Lin and Yi, 1997). These findings were echoed in a large study conducted by Stafford (1980) with 53 international undergraduate students and 225 international graduate students. The study reported problems with homesickness, difficulty in obtaining housing, social relationships, using English, and problems with finances. Leong & Chou (1996), in a qualitative study, wrote that "students experience a whole range of

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adjustment problems including culture shock, language problems, isolation, and the loneliness of living in a strange country for extended periods" (p. 210).

Despite the difficulties that international students experience when studying in the U.S., they do succeed. Hull (1976) defined success as attaining educational goals and doing well in school. Boyer and Sedlacek (1988) defined success as an acceptable GPA and identified eight noncognitive predictors of international student success: (a) self-confidence, (b) realistic self-appraisal, especially concerning academic skills, (c) involvement in community activities, (d) knowledge acquired in the field, (e) successful leadership experiences, (f) long-range goals over short-term goals, (g) ability to understand and cope with racism, and (h) availability of a support person. Stoyloff (1996, 1997) examined the factors associated with academic achievement and noted that language proficiency and appropriate learning study strategies correlated with success-

ful academic performance (high GPA, large number of credits earned, and small number of withdrawals). While all students used learning strategies, the more successful students (those with higher GPAs) used strategies more often. In addition, the successful students regularly availed themselves of social and academic assistance. The more successful students managed their study time, spent time studying, prepared for tests, and made use of support systems (study groups, tutors, friends) (Stoynoff, 1997). A repetition of the importance of support communities is found in the work of Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Faid-Douglas, 2000; Abel, 2002; and Tseng & Newton, 2002. Abel (2002) agreed that successful (defined by the ability to reach academic goals) international students should rely on support communities. He also recommended that international students develop study skills, practice time management, avail themselves of tutoring, and join study groups. (Abel, 2002). Finally, Faid-Douglas (2000) and Tseng & Newton (2002) recommended that international students build support systems and communities by expanding their world-views, asking for help when encountering a problem and increasing their proficiency in English.

Saudi Students: Problems and Challenges

When questioned about the problems and challenges they faced while studying in the United States, the Saudi students I interviewed echoed the literature. They reported that American classroom practices and culture—which include active classrooms, pair work, group work, frequent quizzes and exams, required attendance, constant homework, and self-directed learning—were different and challenging in their new environ-

ment. General sentiments included the following comments:

Student C (female, graduate): “Way classes are here is different. Relationship between teachers and students. Classes and grades don’t depend on one thing—in Saudi Arabia grades depend on exams.”

Student A (female, undergraduate): “Here there is a focus on group work; how students deal with teachers. The number of students in classes is different. In Saudi Arabia, teachers focus on saying what they want and then go. They don’t focus on students’ understanding. There are lecture hall types of classes.”

Generally class attendance is not rigorously focused on in Saudi Arabia.

Student D (male, undergraduate): “In Saudi Arabia, teachers give information directly; students keep information; that’s it—memorization with no application.”

Student J (male, undergraduate): “In the U.S., teachers give information and students must think; they must think critically.”

Another issue that many of the students commented upon was the lack of negotiation, which led to the perception that they were now in a system with arbitrary rules. For example, generally class attendance is not rigorously focused on in Saudi Arabia. If a student is ill and misses class or an exam, he or she speaks to the teacher and is excused for an absence or allowed to reschedule an exam. Things are usually negotiable. The students found quite the opposite to be true here. For example in the language program, an absence from class is not excused; if a student is not in class, the student is absent. If homework is due, it is due with no excuses. At the university, the final exam

schedule is established for the whole university. When an exam is scheduled, the date is not negotiable and there are no make-ups.

This set of circumstances posed problems for the students. Thirteen students (52%) said that they resented the rules of American classrooms and teachers, and they were frustrated by the absence of negotiation. Student A, a fully admitted, female university student, had a story to tell:

“Like I, this term, um there is one week where I was really sick and when I get sick, I can’t go anywhere. I can’t go to school . . . or do anything. And I had 3 midterms in one day, one midterm the second day and a paper the third day. I went to every instructor, and I told them that I can’t do it; I can’t do it. I am sick; I am tired and like . . . and they say it’s not my problem. Go and try with the other teacher. It was like, what could I do? And then my brother got sick, too, and then I was like, okay, I don’t know what should I do. Then I went back to my instructors, and I told them, okay, it’s not like because I told you. I have a recommendation form SHS [student health services]. So, you should be able to know that I have something and sometimes I just can’t do it. I can’t study; I can’t do anything. At least one exam, if it moves to the next day, and I have two midterms in each day, it will be much easier for me. None of my teachers would do that for me. And I had to take them, the three of them in one day. And I didn’t sleep for almost twenty—more than 24 hours.”

Student D (a male, undergraduate student) had a story about being in a different educational environment, too:

“So here’s the point. I mean, it’s just,

sometimes, it’s just like students do not have the time because lots of things. Especially for international students, if something happen back home, you will be just . . . I cannot do anything and no one will understand me on this point from here. My teachers, you have homework—you have to do it. You have exam—you have to take it. You have final—you have to come. So no one will understand me, what my situation is. Okay, I’m in a different environment. I have to go to my exam. I have to do my test. I was in the last week of studying . . . and my uncle, my wife’s father died. I told my instructor I have the same, like, the day after I have an exam, and I told her my uncle died, or my father-in-law died, and she said okay, okay. And after that I got my exam back; I got D. And I told her because of that. I got As in all the previous exams, and she told me, I cannot do anything for you. No help with that . . . When I was back home studying at the university, sometimes I faced problems and I talked to the instructor. He told me, “You are totally fine. You don’t want to come to the midterm, okay; it’s okay. I will give it to you another day. Like that. We just grow up in an environment like this, and now it’s totally changed.”

In addition to differences in classroom culture and practices, eight students (32%) mentioned how difficult it was to be away from home and family. This echoes the work of Lin and Yee (1997) who found that Asian students suffered from loneliness and absence of family and the work of Al-Banyan (1980), Haneef (1996), King-Irani (2004), and Nydell (2006) who described the closeness and interdependence of the family. When the students I interviewed were home, they were surrounded by family members who supported them. Here they are alone. As

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the students reported, “life is drastically different in the United States. One problem is homesickness” (Student H).

Another student added that being away from home is an important aspect of students failing their classes in the United States. While it can be an advantage to be so far away from family because of the freedom, “no one is watching,” it is also a problem because “most Saudis are exposed to many of the things they are not exposed to at home, such as girls, drugs, and alcohol.” Student O (male, undergraduate) also reported that experimentation with drugs and alcohol caused some students to fail. He said that “90% of those who failed did so because of drugs and alcohol. They have no background to make good choices.” Student O added that some Saudi men have a hard time trying to act like Americans with drinking.

In addition, Flaitz (2003) wrote that having a teacher of the opposite sex is a major hurdle that Saudi students must overcome. Al-Banyan (1980), Oliver (1987) and the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (1991) reported that segregation of the sexes is required in Saudi classrooms and is a difference with which students studying abroad must contend. Echoing the literature, the students I interviewed said that this was the first time they had women teachers and classmates. For women, of course, this was their first experience with men instructors and classmates.

While they adjusted, over time, to this difference, it was problematic for some of the students. Student X said that it was different to sit in a class with women teachers. “I felt awful for weeks; then it was okay. At first it was hard to have women in classes.

With time, things got much better.” This student added that he did not know how to talk to women and it made him uncomfortable. He had asked for a woman conversation partner so he could practice talking to the opposite sex.

Finally, another challenge the students faced in the United States is the amount of homework they must do here. Rather than studying and cramming for mid-terms and final exams, students reported that they needed to study every day to prepare for classes. Jeffra Flaitz’ (2003) book, *Understanding Your International Students*, reported the same thing. Using the library to do homework and meet with study groups was a unique experience for the students.

The students were asked how they defined success.

Saudi Students and Success

The students I interviewed tended to agree with the literature’s definition of success (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988; Hull, 1976; Pederson, 1994; and Stoyloff, 1996) in that a successful person receives good grades and is attaining his or her educational goals. They were also inclined to equate success with happiness through helping others or giving back to their country. During the interviews, the students were asked how they defined success and what it meant to them. Here are some of their answers to the question, What is success?:

Student N: “Being happy with the work I’m doing. Find a job when home—teach. Teach when home. Not happy about education there—want to get good education here and then teach.”

Student M: “Success means to be at the top of the mountain. It’s easy to get in but hard to stay there. To be at the top of the

mountain, you'll be like on top of everything. Happiness, and your education and everything. Your position in society, in certain field like in education, in everything. It's the same to be happy, is also the top of the mountain."

Student C: "I think that success means for me, future, improvements. I mean by improvement, improve myself and also the big goal for me to improve my country, especially in my major, chemical engineering. So, yeah, I want to be successful for this reason."

In order to receive a more complete idea of how the students I interviewed defined success, I asked them how they defined a successful student. In general, they said that a successful student is smart, goal oriented, motivated, hard working and focused, and is someone who can manage time well.

Saudi Students and Success Strategies

Time management is a success strategy mentioned in Stoyhoff's (1996, 1997) work. It was a strategy also discussed by almost all the students during at least one of their interviews as a way to successfully manage the multiple demands on their time. Along with managing their time, the students stressed goal setting and planning:

Student M: "Time management yes, and I think you have to set up some goals for yourself."

Student Q: "Set goals. Write everything down, and put on paper in front of me. To remind me of goals. Keep a reminder. Put on paper—1, 2, 3—what to do to reach goals."

Student A: "Noticing a goal, making a plan, then working toward it. The big thing is to go back to plan. Making a plan is easy, staying with the plan is hard. Look back at the plan and just do it."

The students saw time management as a sub-set of goal setting. They said that they would set a goal, focus on the goal, and plan. Time management was a tool in achieving the goal. The students said:

Student A: "Time management. Knowing when finals, papers, quizzes are due. I put them on a schedule and get the whole picture for the term. I decide which classes need the most time and divide up the hours. Look at weekly schedule and schedule out my time."

Student H: "Manage time with a calendar and notebook. I do 70% to 80% of my schedule—it helps a lot."

Student T "Because I have a shortage of time, I have to plan everything carefully. I mean I have to use my time efficiently."

Student I: "Organize time; don't postpone anything; plan ahead and prepare."

Time management, planning, and goal setting are closely associated with study skills and could be seen as examples of study skills. However, the students I interviewed separated and stressed time management, planning, and goal setting from study skills. This category encompasses doing homework, attending class, developing reading strategies, and reviewing. Here is what the students said:

Student U: "Focus and do homework. Don't be late to class and bring books."

Student O: "Always skim before reading so that you'll know what something is

about. Know what the professor thinks, what the professor wants. Understand class itself, how the professor organizes, how the books are written.”

Student K: “Don’t skip reading (do about every other one); go to lectures to prevent reading.”

Student B: “Study very good, immediately after class.”

Student G: “Use vocabulary cards for new vocabulary; read fast, outline when writing.”

Student P: “Prepare and be attentive/listen. Go home and review.”

Able (2002), Faid-Douglas (2000), Stoyhoff (1996, 1997), and Tseng and Newton (2002) wrote that study groups are another strategy that successful international students develop. The students I interviewed agreed and said that study groups serve two purposes. First, they allow students to share information. Secondly, study groups offer a community of support. Student N said, “Having Saudis here to meet with each week relieves the pressure.”

Several students mentioned that they try to meet Americans and make friends. Creating groups of Americans to interact with both helped their speaking abilities and gave them personal resources for help with writing assignments and other classroom tasks. Student A commented that “for me, I can learn more with people. For me parties help. Because I’ll have native speakers and I’ll have to talk, no other language than English.”

Learning about and taking advantage of resources is a success strategy that is

widely reported in the literature about international students (Abel, 2002; Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Faid-Douglas, 2000; Stoyhoff, 1996, 1997; Tseng & Newton, 2002). Using campus resources is a strategy that all the students I interviewed used, as well. Resources ranged from places, such as the library, to people such as writing tutors, professors, and TAs. Student U put it very clearly:

“I have one strategy. It’s the simplest strategy. Ask for help. No, I have a lot of friends here, so I have a list and I have to match . . . I have that kind of problem, I have to call [name of person]. I have this kind of problem, so I just ask for help.”

Other students reported that they took advantage of help by going to teachers’ offices to ask questions; getting writing help from tutors in the Writing Center and the Learning Center; signing up for help at the math study table; and taking part in math review sessions before final exams. Students said that they “use everything: homework, math learning center, Collaborative Learning Center, Writing Center. Ask for help.”

At one time or another during the interviews, all the students stressed the importance of working hard. A major component of success, they felt, is hard work and persistence. The students said:

Student N: “Keep going. Keep trying.”

Student A: “I know that about myself. I can. I not just give up and say I can’t, I can’t.”

Student G: “You must study hard and be good in grammar, be good in listening, in speaking, in writing—not just take it easy.”

Student W: “My strategy is practice,

***“I have one strategy.
It’s the simplest strategy.”***

practice, practice—everything. Reading, writing, listening, speaking. Just practice and work hard.

Student F: “Walking the stairs—take one step at a time; focus on one step. Think I can do it”

Student H “Believe in success; if you don’t believe in yourself, you don’t do it. No one will help you if you don’t help yourself.

Saudi Students – Sharing Success Strategies

Finally, I asked the students if they shared their success strategies with fellow Saudi students, friends, and/or study partners. During the focus group, students answered questions

about support communities and if they shared their success strategies with other students. The over-

whelming answer to the questions was, “yes, yes, yes!” All students said that they shared success strategies with their peers and did what they could to support them with their studies and with general life events.

Specifics about the sharing of success strategies ranged from advising their fellow Saudi students about study skills and inviting friends to join study groups, to keeping sets of exams, notes, reports, and papers to share. There was an overarching tone of willingness to help others succeed. Student D told me that he tries to notice what someone does not know. “If you help someone without asking for a benefit, you’ll have benefits from God.” This student tended to share everything he knows. For example, he helped his fellow Saudis with computers, mid-term projects, and shared his experience. Other students said that they work together, help one another with vocabulary

acquisition and TOEFL strategies, and, most importantly, gave one another encouragement.

One important success strategy that students shared is recommending classes and professors. During the focus groups, students told me that they discussed instructors with their peers and made recommendations for particular classes. Student N pointed out that “if I had a friend who had an experience with [a professor], I’d ask him. I’d switch the class, too.”

In addition to sharing opinions about professors and recommending classes, the students had other success strategies they shared with their fellow Saudi students. Those mentioned include the following:

There was an overarching tone of willingness to help others succeed.

- attend all classes
- get advice for listening and speaking from teachers
- manage time

- study hard
- get good study materials/books for the GRE, TOEFL
- get writing help from the free tutors in the Learning Center
- do homework
- practice English
- be prepared
- take your education seriously

Additionally, the students reported that they formed support communities and shared their successful experiences. In the words of Student M, “I hope everyone get all As in all classes. What they need, paper any stuff that I’ve done. They need it, I give it to them.” Other students echoed his sentiments and said that they “share notes, tests, papers.” Student M added, “Everything that I have I give it to them. I say just go ahead. It will be easy A for you, just study.”

However, some students pointed out that their peers need to work also. It's a two-way street. The students contributed study tips and help as long as the recipient of the help used the strategies and helped him/herself, too. Student M was reluctant to continue to help someone if that person did not try to help himself. "But the one who not help himself, I will not help, so that's it. If you want to work, just show me that you want to work. Otherwise, I can't help you."

This sentiment was repeated when discussing study groups. Student G (male, undergraduate) pointed out:

"There are some rules. Anyone didn't follow the rules, they would not get help from us." "If we like say, we have review questions for the mid-term. And we say like hey guys, you section A, B, C, D. Anyone who didn't do it, like his section to solve the question, we not give him the whole work."

Thus, the students did develop success strategies, and they shared them with their peers, who found them helpful. However, the recipients of the help had to contribute.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that the information I received from the Saudi students I interviewed dovetailed with the literature about international students in the areas of problems and challenges. These students also supported the literature concerning the strategies they developed to succeed. Now, one is left with the question, what does it all mean? What significance comes from conducting an in-depth study of the success

strategies of a group of Saudi students in the United States over a period of one year? The answer is that now Saudi voices are added to the experiences of international students, and it contributes to the body of knowledge about the experiences of a specific group of international students that have been under-represented in the literature. In addition, with a focus on the specific success strategies that Saudi students develop in order to reach their educational goals, more is known about how Saudi students, and international students in general, succeed and what success strategies they develop. As Tseng and Newton (2002) wrote, "How and why some international students experience their study abroad lives in positive ways is largely ignored in existing research" (para. 1). As

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more light is shed on the issue and Saudi students' voices are added to what is known about the problems and challenges that international students face

in their U.S. studies, ESL instructors can be better prepared to help them succeed in attaining their educational goals. The more we know about the experiences of Saudi students in the United States, the more we can focus attention on their success strategies.

Those of us working in language programs, colleges, and universities have the means of gaining a greater insight into our Saudi students and helping them reach their academic goals by understanding more about their experiences and the strategies they develop to succeed and thrive. We can support success by helping our students learn study skills and encourage their use. We can help our students set goals, track their progress in meeting their goals, and recognizing when goals are attained. We can explicitly teach time management, and we can explicitly teach American classroom culture and expectations. We can encourage interactions

between our Saudi students and Americans. We can organize study groups and help students access campus and program resources. Most importantly, we can listen, create community and offer support.

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