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My Teaching and Administrative Experience in the Middle East: A Cultural Perspective

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MY TEACHING AND ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A
CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

My Teaching and Administrative Experience in the Middle East:

A Cultural Perspective

Agustin Francisco

SIT Graduate Institute

August 30, 2013

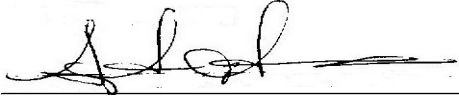
IPP Advisor: Dr. Susan Barduhn

MY ELT TEACHING AND ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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MY ELT TEACHING AND ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of my experience Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) culminating in my current employment as an administrator and instructor in Saudi Arabia. It focuses on TEFL as my passion for more than 20 years and highlights the impact that my various TEFL roles have had on my teaching strategies throughout my academic professional career at various institutions. This paper emphasizes that despite a teacher's vast experience in designing courses, training teachers and teaching at all levels, new cultural contexts, students' expectations as well as the dynamics of divergent administrator/teacher/student cultural perspectives (especially when the administrator/teacher represents a minority culture) present great challenges to successful interpersonal, educational and administrative approaches. Working with students from Saudi Arabia has brought a change in my teaching perspectives and techniques due to their unique social environment, religious beliefs, historical educational approach and family orientation.

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ERIC Descriptors:

Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL)

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)

Cross-cultural communication

Intercultural communication

Role of religion in education

Effects of culture on pedagogy

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My English Language Teaching and Administrative Experience in Saudi Arabia

My project explores my teaching and administrative experiences in Saudi Arabia. At the core of this project is my reflection on the nexus of culture, pedagogy and leadership from my perspective as a member of both a linguistic and religious minority.

Within this context, I will first highlight my own personal religio-cultural identity -- my family upbringing, my heritage, various personal aspects of my life, work ethic, and the complexity of the political and social forces at play in my environment. My identity was not only the foundation and driver of my world view but would later become a dynamic influencer of my professional and personal interactions, misunderstandings, bonding, key learnings and triumphs with both students and faculty at my new place of employment: Interlink.

In Chapter One, My ELT/ Learning Journey, I will provide a comprehensive overview of my origins which will include my early teaching experience as relates to ESL instruction. From there, I will address how my approach to teaching was refined and further developed through my studies with Summer Master of Arts in Teaching (SMAT) and how this prepared me to successfully navigate the cultural and pedagogical challenges of my work at Interlink in Saudi Arabia. Finally, I will present the strategies that I developed and which evolved from my day-to-day interactions as a minority culture teacher in a strongly religious, yet ethnically and experientially diverse Islamic cultural context and work environment.

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My English Language Teaching/Learning Journey

Every member of a given culture has his/her identity derived from some unique characteristics, experiences, outlooks, and in part from his/her membership in particular groups and communities. My national culture identity was not an individualistic one; rather it relied on the notion of identifying oneself in terms of the groups or communities to which one belonged. “Cultural identity, in other words, depends on our similarity to others.” (Moran, 2001, p.100) I found this to be a key concept in my sensitivity to and ability to accept a new culture and its components, and the reciprocal acceptance I received on the part of many of my colleagues and students, some sooner than others.

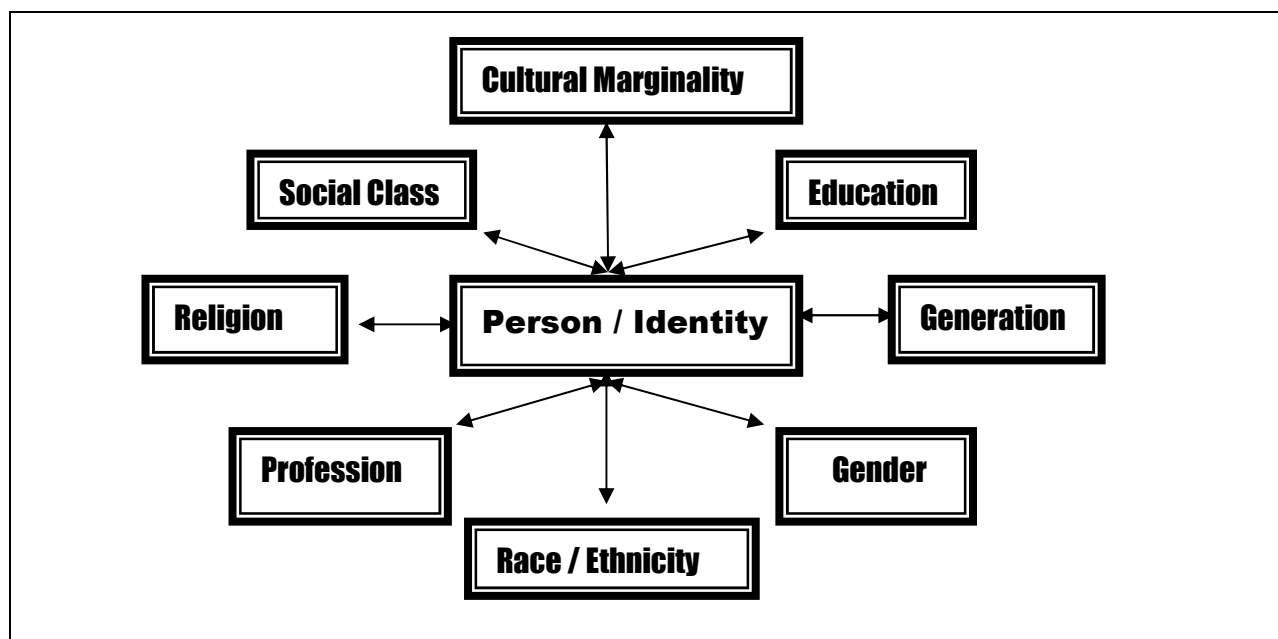


Figure #1: Forces Impacting my Personal and Cultural Identity (Moran, 2001,p.93)

The above diagram represents those characteristics which belong to the perceptual and the identity groups which intimately influenced my self-definition and constructed my concepts of

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education (English language learning in particular) and my eventual career choice. By looking at it closely, it will be perceived how being part of them affected who I am and my relationship with me and with others.

Geo-political Influences

I grew up in La Hispaniola, the major Caribbean island comprising the two sovereign nations of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, located between Cuba to the west and Puerto Rico to the east. Having been born on an island does not provide the islanders with the opportunity of sharing insights with people from other languages and cultures like those who are born on any continent surrounded by other countries and populated by diverse peoples. Another disadvantage for the islanders is that the country depends predominately on its own resources. The lack of access to tools, ideas, different mindsets and skills limits the development of a multicultural and multilingual awareness. This is really an irony because the complete island “La Hispaniola” holds two completely different cultures with their own idiosyncrasies, identities and languages. One would think that every citizen should be fully bilingual, culturally enriched and with a more diverse viewpoint, being sensitive, mindful and capable of using these settings to his/ her own advantage.

However, the history behind the two countries is full of battles, invasions, misunderstandings and exchange of governmental power. The presence and control of powerful and dominant forces such as France and Spain brought divisions, struggles for supremacy of personal, political, economic interests; it was never conducive to conversations that sought for peace and understanding. It was always a one-way street.

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Believe or not, after so many decades, the situation is still the same. The only thing which has changed is the actors. Even though the two countries now have more well-prepared professionals, better educational/technological systems and a dual international trade, deep down inside, the feeling of ownership of the land never disappeared. A lot of people from both sides benefit from it.

Once the two countries became independent from one another, the Dominican Republic was able to develop a system which allowed its citizens to have access to information beyond its borders. The system created different and unequal social classes with access to abundant resources to some and limited to others. The repressive system in power provided a controlled public school program in which the students were only allowed to use books and materials approved by the new president of the dictatorship. There was no access to the outside world and its powerful resources. The closest culture (Haiti) to exchange languages, ideas, and to nurture future plans was also under a similar system; therefore, no communication of any sort was taking place and there were no signs of this happening anytime soon and traveling abroad was just a dream for many. It was necessary to look for solutions within the country despite its limited resources.

The French Government had established “the French Alliance in 1917 in the capital of the country but then, the language didn’t have the economic power or the prestige of others such as English. It was also related to Haiti, its people and the history of the island. People were not interested in it; they did not identify with it as a future resource. Even though it was thought to

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be a cultural center, everybody perceived it as a way to unify the island. It was not considered an option.

In 1962, the American government opened a Bi-National Center. Despite the fact that the real aim was for the USA to have a dominant and active presence in the Caribbean due to Cuba and its relationship with Russia, this center was seen as a great opportunity to learn the language and it simultaneously represented prestige, power, money and a possible way to migrate and seek The American Dream. The Bi-National Center (BNC) just like the French Alliance would have native speakers of the language and administrators as well. The only difference was that the American Embassy in the country promoted a board of local citizens to do the in-house work such as promotions, support and acceptance. They were the two only sources for acquiring a new language and its culture. The BNC became a highly accepted institution with access only for the children of those who belonged to the upper class of the society. It was impossible for working class families to send their children to study there due to the high fees charged. This – whether by design or consequence – perpetuated the gap between the social classes. As time went on, there was an inevitable change in the perception of English as a sought-after language, and a predictable market for English learning emerged. New English institutes began to spring up; however, despite the lower fees, many families (including mine) still found themselves locked out of access.

Family Dynamics

My family happened to be part of the socially and economically deprived society. My parents, like many others, worked as hard as they could to provide us with food, clothing and the

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opportunity to go to public schools. Once graduated from high school, those who wanted to go on to the university needed to move to the capital to attend the public one. This too was out of reach for my family. My brothers and sisters and I were lucky to be sponsored by one of my mother's friends who happened to marry a foreign man. She wanted us to choose any of the technological courses which were offered in the city.

The family strategy was for me to study for at least 6 months and then another member of the family would be given the opportunity. I chose to study English at one of the low-fee institutes. I was highly motivated both by my personal passion for learning English as well as the family and social status that came with the territory. Soon, I became one the best students in the institute often staying past my study time for almost the entire day to listen to the advanced students. After six months, without any formal or even informal training, I was given the opportunity by the director to help new students with their homework. It was believed that if one was a good student and knew the material well enough, one would be able to teach by following the books (which I knew by heart) and doing everything exactly as the teachers did. Thus, a teacher was born.

English, My Personal Passion and Social Ladder

My passion for English and now for teaching would not let me stop there. My passion for English started when a friend of mine showed me some booklets he used to get from The Hemphill School that had a long-distance learning program. I used to read them over and over as often as I could. Once I got the taste of teaching, I wanted more. I would go to the well-regarded BNC to try to practice with the students from there. I could only do it outside the

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center when the students were coming out. I also wanted to listen to the teachers who were native speakers. It was like another fascinating world to me but it was impossible for me to belong to it.

Learning the language and teaching it changed my life completely. I was admired and respected by my friends and my parents' friends would see me as someone with a bright future. I was only 16 years old. After finishing the course, I stayed as part of the teaching staff. The director and founder of the institute would rely on me every time he had a new group or whenever a teacher would call in sick. I was able to help myself and the family with the little money I was getting paid.

I kept attending school and delivering English lessons to others who wanted to see a change in their lives just like I did. After two years of work in the institute, the administrator told me about an international program sponsored by the American Embassy. The American Field Service (AFS) program was offered around the world to young high school students who needed to show a wide variety of skills including the knowledge of English. The director strongly believed that I was a good candidate and he gave me the papers to show to my family. There was a fee to be paid in dollars.

My family wanted me to do it but we didn't have the money. With my father having been spirited out of the country by my grandmother to save him from the jailing, torturing and killing of many young men by the transitional government that was taking place, we were struggling even more financially. But the opportunity was too great to pass up, and each family member took on any extra work they could to come up with the fee. We assured the selection

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committee that we would be able to afford the fees, I was accepted and seven months later, I was on a plane to California where I finished my high school studies.

After a few years, I went back home completely changed and full of ideas, memories and skills. I was determined to do the best I could for my people and their future. The best way to do it was through education. I wanted to continue teaching English to share my experiences and knowledge. Just like many of my compatriots, I also had dreams. I needed to help them work for their dream and for them to see that they can really come true. The events in my life at that point had been a clear example that dreams could be fulfilled if you worked for them.

I began my career as a university student at the Catholic University where my brother was still working but as a department head. I also began teaching English there. I became the first black Dominican who joined the foreign teaching staff. Four years later, the BNC offered me a teaching position. I began teaching at both places while I was studying for a degree. The BNC still had the support of the American Embassy and I decided to stop teaching at the university.

An event that solidified my commitment to my professional path was the death of my brother in an airplane crash. Being the oldest brother, he would always act as a father and/or as the general support of the family. He was aware of the slow recovering of my dad from the tortures of all the times in jail back in the days of the dictatorship; therefore, he had to take control of any given situation. Now, I had to continue his legacy.

So, I stopped my studies and became a full time teacher to meet the family's needs. I also needed to be close to my brother's children who were studying English in the center under

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my sponsorship. I also had to become what my brother expected of me: a productive member of the family and of our society, as well. My brother, always excellent at everything he did in his short life, left me a difficult legacy to carry forward. He had gained a lot of respect in our community and everybody was looking to me as his replacement or as someone who could follow in his footsteps. I always remember the moment when he told me how proud he was of me and my achievements.

Coupled with my passion, the social benefits of my career, and the expectation to care for my extended family, I was inescapably driven by the echo of my brother's expression of pride in my personal and academic achievements. Teaching became even more endeared to me and I became a respected teacher, then coordinator, and finally Academic Director at the center. The close and trustworthy relationship I developed with the American Embassy and the lectures I gave at other Bi-National centers throughout Latin America set me on a course to present with renowned trainers and authors at a two-day training for English Language Teaching Fellows (ELFs) at Harper's Ferry. During the conference, I found out that they were all from SIT. This led me to my ultimate enrollment in SIT's Summer Master of Arts in TESOL (SMAT) Degree Program.

As I prepared to enter the SMAT program, I brought with me a keen commitment to professional development that was part and parcel of my cultural and personal history. I would find that education, namely English language education, had very different layers of importance to me than it would to my future students and coworkers at my future place of employment in Saudi Arabia.

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Before I explore the cultural context within which I was to practice my craft, there is one more influence that I will describe – the impact of my professional development within the SMAT program on my educational philosophy and teaching practice.

The SMAT Program

The SMAT program, offered within a well-respected university, played a major role in my professional development and in shaping and expanding my strong personal and cultural views of ESL instruction. The SMAT syllabus is based on a wide range of principles, methods and strategies to enhance the professional's understanding of the student as a whole person, with both strengths and weaknesses. The intercultural approach within the SMAT program allowed me to see the importance of a broader understanding of others and their culture and how that understanding might intersect with my own.

Not only did the SMAT curriculum help me grow inter-culturally, but the everyday contact with my colleagues who came from different countries, different backgrounds and cultures helped me to develop a better sense of my own role in a wider universe. Viewing language as a means of bridging the information gaps which I had inherited from my upbringing prepared me to aid my future students by developing their linguistic knowledge and skills within a culturally respectful but more expansive, intercultural framework.

Despite the fact that many academic studies have drawn attention to the importance of culture in language teaching and linguistic development, as a practical matter, the impact of culture has been underrated and the integration of the cultural component within TEFL has remained difficult to accommodate in practice. (Corbett, 2003, p.1)

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At SIT, English is presented as a means of communication which should be bound to culturally-specific conditions of use but should be easily transferable to any cultural setting. All the programs under the umbrella of “World Learning” integrate culture as a main component of the curricula while acknowledging the obvious importance of language as a promoter of peace across cultures and as a facilitator of social ranking and functionality which varies from community to community.

My perspectives of TEFL kept evolving as I experienced how the cultural aspects of the SMAT model broadened my scope and sharpened my focus on the impact of developing the four basic skills of language learning. The program aims to teach language through modern strategies and techniques. Graduates from the program should be able to help the students:

- Appreciate the similarities and differences between their own and the cultures of the communities / countries where the target language is spoken;
- Identify with the experiences and perspectives of people in the countries / communities where the target language is spoken;
- Use this knowledge to develop a more objective view of their customs and ways of thinking.

These techniques could very easily prepare anyone to linguistically and culturally adapt to current and future communicative practices due to the fact that they focus on the learners, not so much on the teachers. I learned to reflect on the ways in which my own language and community functions and then to transfer this reflection into a deeper understanding of the language and behavior of the home community with which I was about to engage. From here I

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hoped to be prepared to consider how the target language (L2) could be used to achieve the explicit and implicit cultural goals of the foreign community.

As an intercultural learner, I now considered that my job was not only to serve as a language instructor but to ultimately serve as a mediator between different social groups that used different native languages and language varieties. The ultimate goal of the SMAT program approach to language education is not so much of developing a “native speaker competence” but rather an intercultural communicative competence. (Corbett, 2003, p.3)

The teaching / learning resources developed in the SMAT program that were then used in Saudi Arabia were able to incorporate aspects of the Saudi culture such that both native and non-native teachers become particularly valued for their own ability to move between the home and the target cultures. The program shaped me as non-native speaker to be able join a staff of native speakers not only to teach English, but also to help improve the teaching of the language in The Middle East.

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The New Cultural Context -- SIT, SMAT, Interlink and Saudi Arabia

The relationship between Global Interlink Language Centers and SIT would be my pathway to employment in Saudi Arabia. In this chapter, I will explore the cultural, organizational, and instructional context within which I was engaged.

Global Interlink Language Centers (GILC) was founded in 1979 to provide academic placement of international students and cross-cultural training and orientation for mid-level professionals moving for the first time to another country, especially to the United States. Its philosophy and style were shaped by the Peace Corps experience of its founders. Guided by the values of quality and fairness, GILC's curriculum emphasizes independent language learning, cultural awareness, higher order thinking, enhanced ways of learning, and caring respectful attitudes within one's personal and professional interactions. (InterLink, 2012)

For more than a decade, Interlink expanded its teaching philosophy to The Middle East, specifically at Al Yamamah University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). GILC became aware of the quality programs at SIT, now a leading organization designing language programs to train professionals to go abroad and change people's lives through many social and humanistic approaches. SIT's graduates became of major interest to GILC and were actively recruited to develop GILC's programs across Saudi Arabia and at all different levels including its TESOL program in KSA.

The opportunity offered by Interlink to find a job in a competitive global market was clearly intriguing to me; I decided to travel abroad to KSA to be emerged in a different culture

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and at the same time to use what I had learned and experienced during my time at the SMAT program. It seemed a fitting and challenging culmination of my professional development.

The Role of Religion in the KSA Educational System

Setting the stage for my ELT work in Saudi demands the examination of the dominant role of religion within the Saudi educational system. Across all levels of education, religion is a key factor guiding major infrastructure, scheduling and course content decisions. Examples include:

- the separation of the sexes leading to the existence of two parallel educational systems for males and females;
- the scheduling of classes and administrative meetings respective of the times of the 5 daily congregational prayers (salat);
- the inclusion or exclusion of content and activities within the curriculum based on religious laws and beliefs. (Al Saif, 2003))

In general, education is the backbone of developed and developing societies. The educational system of any given country intends to teach and foster certain attitudes, behavior and most importantly a world view to young people. What can be considered consistent and important in any educational system is even stronger when it comes to a religious one. When religion is involved in the education of any human being, it becomes not only the message of a very important component of the society, but also the driving force of the graduate professional. (Al-Saif, 2003)

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In this context, I could draw on my own educational experience attending a catholic school and then a catholic university where our religion played an important role. The religious aspect of my home and school education shaped me as a better human being and a more understanding professional. The Saudi educational system follows this suit. With a well-entrenched religious system, the Saudis do label themselves as a religious state. The system is very open, however, and it does not teach Islam only but also addresses the values of humanity, love and respect for one another. The core religious subject of Tawhid or Monotheism provides the basic premise underlying this exploration of these inter-relational values. The treatment of Jews and Christians is outlined in the Saudi religious textbooks for Tawhid. It is through the analysis of how the “others” are treated and presented in these textbooks that better self-identification is established for the average Saudi- schooled student. (Al-Saif, 2003)

Other core features of formal religious instruction which are embedded within the national Saudi educational system are the memorization of major parts of the Qur’an and the application of Islamic tradition to everyday life inclusive of elementary to university level coursework. The religion curriculum is divided into five subjects.

- ***Quran class*** (sometimes called Tilawa or Quranic reading) – This class has no textbooks (except the Qur’an) and students are basically assigned certain Qur’anic verses for memorization and later explanation of their meanings. Tajweed usually accompanies Quran classes and through it, students learn the art of reciting the Qur’an properly.

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- ***Fiqh, or Jurisprudence class*** - This class is linked in its first years with the Tawhid textbooks and it discusses different rulings and elaborations of the basic rules of Islamic law.
- ***Hadith class--*** In it the most relevant, credible, and known Prophetic sayings, actions and approvals of behaviors are introduced and explained.
- ***Monotheism or Tawhid class.*** This class is highly visible because Tawhid is the only religious subject, aside from the Quran, that is taught every single academic year. The textbook can be viewed as a semi-divine book to the Saudi officials who designed the division of religion classes. Its continued presence is needed for the planners of the educational system as much as Quran classes are needed. In related Tafsir classes, exegeses of select verses from the Quran are presented and, again, memorized by students. (Al-Saif, 2003)

According to Mr. Bader Mousa Al Saif of Harvard University, he states the following in a presentation prepared for the Watson Institute for International Studies, “It is through the interesting lens of the internal memoranda that were published by the Ministry of Education and handed down to every single teacher that the goals of teaching Tawhid will be presented.” (Al-Saif, 2003, p. 4) Although one may argue that the needs of students are different as they move from one grade to another, the memorandum that is sent to all teachers in Saudi schools guiding them on the goals of Tawhid classes is the same for elementary, middle, and secondary level students. Tawhid is “not a subject like other subjects and the goal is not memorization, knowledge, and education only, but more importantly it is designed to entice the religious

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emotions in the souls of students... it must rather be indoctrinated and reflected in the life and behavior of students.” (Al-Saif, 2003, p. 5) A carte blanche is accorded to Tawhid teachers in pursuing the most effective methods needed for implanting the thoughts of the Tawhid textbooks in the minds of their students. This belief system is consciously crafted and propagated.

This strong religious core was felt throughout the educational system. The traditional approach used to inculcate and effectively preserve religious texts, relying heavily on memorization, was carried over into other realms of instruction in the Kingdom – including within the private sector where I would be employed. Knowledge, understanding and respect for it was key to my ability to approach, challenge and devise new strategies for teaching and supervision of the teaching staff at Interlink. I would find that the religious boundaries that I was to encounter would fuel my creativity and problem solving skills and indeed those of my teaching staff.

The Role of English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

In the last few decades, English has emerged as the most prominent language for international communication, technology and trade. It is spoken by more people in the world than any other language. This is no less true of the perception and the rise in status of English within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Brief consideration, then, is given here to the how this multi-faceted and evolving perception of English within the Kingdom formed the cultural and professional context within which I would teach the language. (Powell, 2008-2013)

Saudi Arabia, named after the Saud family, is a relatively young country under its current political construct. It opened up to the world only 55 years ago. Ever since it received world

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attention for all its natural oil resources, it began to search for trained professionals to help develop its infrastructure and its populace as well. In response to the relevance of the English language was reflected in the economy, business contracting, international trade, diplomacy, higher studies, research, peace talks and affairs of international cooperation across the world, and in order to compete effectively in the global market, Saudi Arabia (KSA) was determined to embrace learning and utilizing English to become a full-fledged and notable participant in growing marketplace. Not only the government, but businessmen, academics, and common citizens became aware of the necessity of breaking the language barriers. (Powell, 2008-2013)

The demand for English was growing exponentially. Business demands, media sources and technological developments helped to fuel the rising prominence status of the language in the society.

English Instruction in Saudi Arabia

As Saudi expanded its economy, it opened its doors to foreign business investments. The pressing need for the creation of an English-speaking populace became of utmost importance – economically and politically. This need drove the development of KSA educational policy. The emerging policy stated that students in public, private and government institutions should learn at least one foreign language in order to interact with other cultures for the purpose contributing with humanity in general.

Starting under the rule of King Fahad, English became an important subject in the national school curriculum; and since the beginning of the 80s, the Ministry of Education has been highly concerned with the pursuit of excellence in effective English teaching, continuing to

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evolve the system of instruction. At the primary level, many programs and curricula from the USA and the UK adapted their programs to meet the demands of the Saudi system especially at a private level. A lot of ESL/EFL teachers have brought their experiences and forthcoming ideas to empower the existing programs and to develop new ones. (Powell, 2008-2013)

Unfortunately, at the college level, there was little impact from the revolutionary changes felt at other levels of English language instruction. The Ministry of Education decided to create a program for college level students to study the language after finishing their technical careers. Many students are even paid a monthly allowance to attend these programs. These programs continue to struggle with issues of effective instructional techniques (as I will discuss in the next chapter) but English has become well routed within the educational institutions in the country. Today, prestigious universities such as King Fahad and King Abdullah Universities use English exclusively as the medium of instruction. Military academics have included English as a subject in their curricula. Technological and vocational institutes have also developed English curricula.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has experienced great political, social, economic changes and development to meet global requirements. Recent changes (including changing the days of the weekend from Thursday/Friday to Friday/Saturday, an historic change to a three-decade long practice in the country) show the strong commitment of the government to bring the country to a more competitive position in the world. Many expect English usage to fully meet societal and political standards to become the official second language in the country. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education, 2011)

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Evolution of English Language Teaching (ELT) Strategies in Saudi Arabia

The history of ELT in KSA presents an interesting story of changes and challenges. The first syllabus or curriculum was designed primarily to aid communication skills. The approaches and methods used were intended to develop the four basic skills of the language – reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Examining the educational system in KSA shows the following progression as well as the number of years of English instruction in each level. As the diagram shows, students who finish their elementary years can go on to study at a vocational school or at a university. By this time, they have already taken 6 years of English. Every pathway requires a high level of English. To go to Teacher Training College (TTC) training, they have to show their English proficiency. To achieve scholarships to study abroad, they need to obtain a high mark on either the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), both of which require a high intermediate or an advanced level of English.

Beyond academics, in order to compete in the local and international job market, students need high English proficiency. Advertisements for job openings, the teaching profession publications as well as local newspapers stress the preference of employers for English-speaking candidates. Industries, hospitals and hotels expect applicants to possess some skills in the language as well. Having competence in the language opens great opportunities for people to find rewarding and high-paying jobs within the country.

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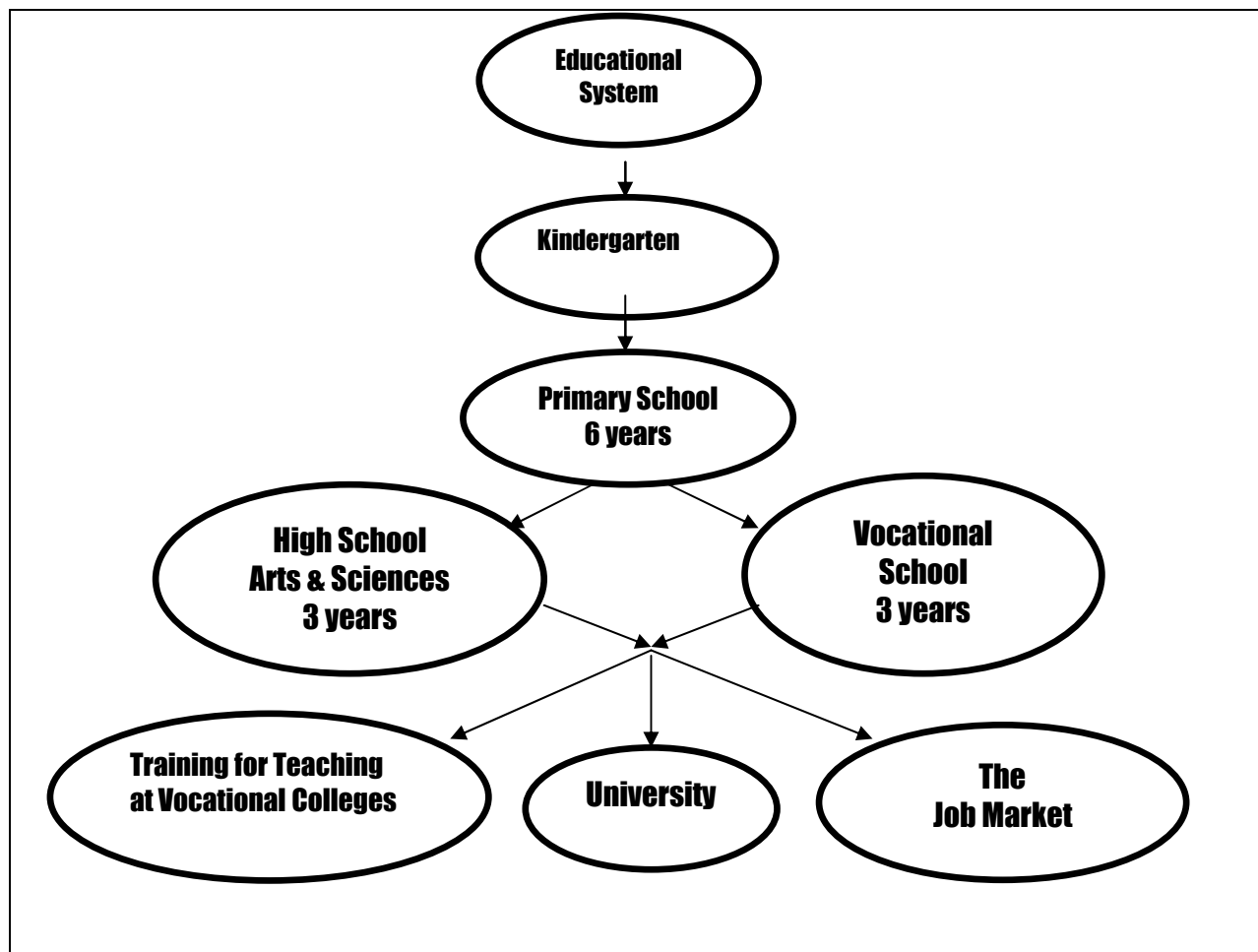


Figure 2: Saudi Educational System and Years of English Instruction

Unfortunately, despite the fact that the educational system required English to be taught at an early age, the students were not getting the skills and competence to be able to communicate successfully in L2. Clearly the teaching strategies used were not delivering on the governments' expectations.

Saudi teachers were primarily employed to provide L2 instruction and from some perspectives, local language teachers had some advantages over native speakers who did not know Arabic. They:

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- Taught English as a foreign language.
- Taught monolingual groups of learners.
- Shared or spoke as a native the same language as their students.
- Were able to focus on troublesome pronunciation, syntax and morphology.
- Were highly respected for being bilingual (Hall, 2001, p. 175)

Several methods and teaching strategies were advocated to foster communication; however, not much was achieved due to the fact that Arabic (L1) was used by both students and teachers to achieve their academic (and personal) goals. Saudi teachers were predominately employed and despite the fact that most of them went abroad for training and study in English, they still used the mother tongue in class to get the message across. Also, the syntactical, morphological and grammatical differences between the two languages prompted teachers to use the grammar translation method versus a communicative one. (Corbett, 2003, p. 39)

Another factor driving teaching strategies was that memorization was highly emphasized in the Saudi national curriculum and communication was historically of very little importance; thus, teachers had little experience in this style of teaching leading to students getting limited L2 practice and learning opportunities. This is the main reason touted by many as to why, after so many years of English instruction within the Saudi educational institutions, students had very little communication competence. (A. Al-Anqri, Mohammed. Personal Correspondence, June 2013)

Mr. Anqri stated; "Saudi teachers' strategies focused on the written language and not so much on using the language in the spoken form. From the students' perspective, the

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characteristics which seem to favor the local Saudi teachers did not benefit them. Language was presented to them as a system of rules and the task for them as language learners was to internalize these rules by whatever means were at their disposal or more usually, in formal contexts, at the disposal of the teachers or teaching institutions. Language was perceived as unified, and the aim for the learner was to master its structures; however, in this process, considerations of meanings were seen as peripheral. While the traditional strategies used by Saudi teachers did help the students improve their tests-taking skills and enabled them to achieve the acceptable grade that opened the door to study abroad, once in the foreign country, they often had to join a class that helped them become more competent in speaking the language."

Mr. Al Harbi said; "The government, aware of this deficit and focused on the growing importance of English language instruction, offered (and continues to offer) ample opportunities to Saudi local English teachers to study overseas, to participate in international conferences, and to attend many forums in Saudi Arabia designed to bring in international experts in the field. Despite all these options, local Saudi teachers of English have continued using the most traditional teaching techniques."

ELT – KSA Career Opportunity for Native Speakers of English

Native-speakers of English were recruited by both the public and private sector. Saudi Aramco is the largest company in the world offering employment to both the locals who speak English fluently and to international skilled professionals and offers excellent benefit packages. Outside of this major employer, native-speaking English teachers are competitive in the market; depending on the social reputation of their countries of origin within Saudi society with

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individuals from the United Kingdom and the US high on the social ladder. However, despite the financial benefits, relatively few wish to navigate the preconceptions that many have that some Saudi laws and attitudes make living and working in the Kingdom too difficult and complicated to even contemplate.

Interestingly, unlike in many other ESL job markets, in the KSA market being a native speaker is not the singular criterion for being successful in the field. It does open the opportunity to enter into the field but does not guarantee a secure, long-term job. The fact that the number of second and foreign language speakers of English far exceeds the number of first language speakers supports the contention that the English language is no longer the privilege of native speakers. A degree in TESOL and some years of experience are key to maintaining a high-paying teaching job in KSA. In addition, there is an expectation on the part of the employer and the Ministry of Education that native speakers bring new and innovative ELT strategies to the job in order to close the gap in ESL outcomes that still exists within the country. This demands that teachers entering the Saudi system have a command of diverse and effective strategies which demonstrate better and long-lasting results.

The government is committed to making improvements in the national curriculum to meet the ultimate goal of their populace being able to communicate with English-speaking people around the world. As the country moves into the 21st century, the Saudi Arabian approach to education has been changing dramatically due to the fact that many Saudis in the labor force are educated abroad mainly in English-speaking countries. Institutions providing English language instruction (both public and private) are reflecting this desire for improvement,

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creating a ripe if untested environment for the introduction of new policy and strategies.

(Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education, 2011)

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Introduction of New Learning and Teaching Strategies

Given the questionable success of KSA's historic teaching strategies described in the previous section, at the outset there was a demonstrated need for the development of a program that could effectively facilitate students' actually acquiring the language for communication purposes. Within this chapter, I will give an overview of the Interlink English Language teaching approach, inherent challenges in the approach, followed by a discussion of how, building upon this model, my team developed strategies and systems to address the cultural, structural, religious and professional barriers that we encountered, ultimately creating a rich, meaningful and effective English Language learning environment.

Interlink Model – Learning Centered and Center Stage

For Interlink it was easy to take advantage of this new market and expand its presence throughout the Kingdom. It was known by many in the private sector and its Saudi Interlink Language Center (SILC) program had been successful due to the skillful teachers they had recruited at SIT. SILC entered into a partnership with a local company, English Gate Academy (EGA), in order to expand its operations into the public sector. Other programs included the "Academic Year Program" (AYP) as well as the "Graduate Year Program" (GYP) which was designed to improve English language skills of students who were preparing to enter the work force.

Interlink and EGA embrace the belief that in order to change people's perception about teaching methodology and about accountability as well, one must find a way to impact

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previously held beliefs. The first, most critical step in the Interlink approach is to change the perception of language. Language has to be seen as a system for the expression of meaning. If language is perceived as a system for expressing meanings, and if different learners have different communicative ends in view, then, surely these different communicative ends should be reflected in the things that learners are taught. In other words, there ought to be a different syllabus that somehow addresses their needs and goals. This notion of learners having different communicative requirements and that these have to be reflected both in the content of the curriculum (what is taught) and learning processes (how it is taught) shifts attention from the teacher and the textbook toward the learner with the optimal result being learner-centered instruction. (InterLink, 2012)

The Interlink EGA program is based on key principles including:

- Learning centeredness
- Learner-centeredness
- The use of real language that students can relate to their lives
- A focus on oral skills
- The use of no / little L1
- An exchange of intercultural information and values
- An emphasis on respect for the individual (each student, the teacher) and for his or her feelings
- Communication that is meaningful to the learner is emphasized
- Instruction that involves much work in pairs and small groups

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- Peer support and interaction viewed as necessary for learning
- Learning a foreign language viewed as self-realization experience
- The teacher as counselor or a facilitator

Theoretically, a learning-centered classroom is designed to enable the learner to make critical pedagogical decisions by systematically training them in the skills they need to make such decisions. Such a classroom is constituted with complimentary aims; while some aims focus on language content, others focus on process. Learners are, therefore, systematically educated in the skills and knowledge they will need in order to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn.

Challenges of the Model

At Interlink, we do not assume that learners come to our program possessing critical learning skills; teachers have to be sensitive enough to accept that many of them will only begin to develop such skills in class. Some teachers understand that the most difficult aspect of the approach is that the students do not know what they want. Undoubtedly, many students may not be able to formulate their needs in any precise fashion, especially when they have to do it in a foreign language. This is a great argument for incorporating a “learning-how-to-learn” dimension into the classroom.

This approach represents a huge challenge for the teachers to put into action and for the students to be willing to participate in it. As for the students, they are embarking on a completely new and different way of learning. They come from a teacher-centered learning experience in which participation is very minimal or almost zero; therefore, they often feel

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reluctant, at first, to accept the new strategy. As for the teachers, some react negatively to the concept because they feel that, implicit in the notion of this learner-centered model is a devaluing of their own professional roles. Predominately, the teachers have been trained to lecture the students and to follow a textbook. This new approach brings a lot changes in their teaching practices, behaviors and roles. The approach clearly states that successful learning happens when:

- Teachers work on the students while the students work on the language.
- Teachers should not do what students can do.
- Teachers become counselors and they only act when the students require their help.
- Students should become autonomous learners.
- They should be given the task to find solutions among themselves.
- The main resource for the students is the other students.
- The presence and participation of the teachers become secondary.

Teachers' discomfort with the approach is intensified by the fact that the approach does not use textbooks. At Interlink, it was deemed that using textbooks, as is the case in most other programs, presented the possibility of creating a bigger and constant cultural problem due to the fact that many of the pictures and themes often go against Islam and its principles. The fact that 90% of ELT textbooks are meant to be used in countries where religion does not play a great deal of importance in society, it is a clear example of a wise decision of creating materials which can target students' needs and lives.

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Not using textbooks has been shocking and challenging for both students and teachers because both groups believe that learning cannot take place if a book is not used. Some teachers complain about not having enough time to plan a lesson following the approach. They need constant support on how to make positive changes on their teaching strategies. The students, on the other hand, feel that without books no learning can take place. Even though many of our students have felt some frustrations and failure trying to learn the language, they are grasping the understanding that successful learning is possible if they comprehend the process and create their own pathway to proficiency. After a couple of weeks the students' perception changes completely and results can be perceived.

Newly Introduced Strategies

Strategies to overcome these issues include increased support for both students and teachers. Teachers are afforded the opportunity to benefit from the exchange of ideas and support from more experienced instructors. Resource materials have been developed to help teachers. They are full of pictures and some vocabulary. It requires some time to adapt to them and to prepare the lessons. Under these premises, the continued demand on instructors is creativity. As for students, since they have to be actively involved, they are required to attend classes and work on a portfolio as an indication of their growth in the program. They have to do homework regularly and they are advised to use the language in their daily life activities without feeling ashamed or embarrassed. Gratefully, the culture urges Saudi Arabia to interact with British, Americans and other societies around them to improve their language skills and to better

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understand these societies. Students are also encouraged to read local and national newspapers published in English as well as to listen to the radio and watch the news on TV.

There is continued training for teachers and for the students as well. It is a process that can take little time for some and a longer time for others. Interestingly, we have found that those who graduated from the program at SIT have no problem in adapting to the Interlink EGA program and its requirements.

Accounting for Religious Diversity within the Instructional and Program Design

Once the students graduate from college, they join our program. Despite the fact that students have reached this level of instruction, it is prudent that staff keep in mind that our teaching should remain aligned with Islamic principles and beliefs. Lots of discussion goes on among site directors, department heads, and teachers on the type of materials to be used in the teaching of English, strategies, and scheduling accommodations. Several examples of conflicts and subsequent program resolutions are shared below:

1. ***Instructors' Religious Interpretations*** -- Many of our teachers are Muslim-born and others are converts. As a non-Muslim professional and supervisor of the program, I learned that in many cases this meant that members of these groups may take a different stance of various religious principles. For instance, I encountered resistance from some who choose not to teach vocabulary words that are against their religious beliefs. One of my arguments came when a teacher refused to teach words related to musical instruments, alcohol and presenting women in leading roles. My perception was that as long as we did not try to change their understanding of what their society presents as

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forbidden, they should be aware of the existence of these things and how to interact with them appropriately. By having a vast knowledge of vocabulary and its use, they would be able to express themselves freely and more accurately. I had to respectfully point out that many of those words exist in their own language and they are even described in their Holy Book. Words, such as “*guitar, violin, pig, and wine*, can be taught with proper explanations of their meanings and their social and religious place in Saudi society. It was my position that students have the right to be exposed to a wide range of expression even if only with the goal of facilitating their ability to discuss both religious appropriateness or inappropriateness and more so to become not only speakers of a second language but also to become citizens of the world.

2. ***Burden of Lesson Preparation*** -- A very important part of my duties as a supervisor was to support and help the teachers develop supplementary materials to help them with their lesson plans. Our program with its absence of textbooks requires a great deal of the teacher’s time to prepare classes. Teachers complained constantly about the lack of time to be ready for their teaching. I dedicated a lot of my free time to developing posters and other supplementary materials. The materials were related to three areas: a) Teaching support; b) Student engagement, and c) Teaching environment. Every single design needed to go through the approval of the teachers and the Department Head. They each would evaluate them based on a religious point of view, and subsequent changes would be made if in fact they were to be used in class with the students.

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3. ***Scheduling*** -- Due to the fact that teachers had a lot of contact hours and very little time for lesson preparation, we sat down to make some changes on the schedule to adapt it to our needs. The biggest challenge was to work the schedule around prayer time. We could change anything but the time for praying. It was a must to provide the students with lunch time and prayer time right after. Time for lunch could be the same all the time but prayer time changes from season to season based on the position of the sun.
4. ***Other Religious Considerations*** -- The importance of religion is present at every moment. For example, I asked them to greet themselves in the morning saying “good morning” instead of their native greeting. I soon learned that they would use their greeting first, followed by what I thought was the English translation. The reason why they preferred to use their own (As-Salaamu Alaykum) is because of the message it entails. When they greet in Arabic, they wish everyone blessing from God (Allah) while in English our greeting is just another way of saying “hi”.

Our program is under constant revision and change. We promote the use of teaching English through project-based learning (PBL). When the students need to work on a project, they are the ones to choose the topic. If the teacher wants to provide some ideas and options, they have learned to choose very carefully in order not to cross the thin line of religious principles and cultural values given that some themes can be controversial, such as women driving and the role of women in the society.

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Intercultural and Intra-cultural Diversity

Even though our curriculum was based on principles and placing emphasis on students as whole persons, we still needed to negotiate with a rainbow of differences among the main players in our program and their understanding of the application of religious beliefs and values.

As I mentioned previously, I was born and raised in a Catholic family; therefore, not only did I need to be cognizant of the religious culture within the host country, I also needed to be aware of people's perception of my upbringing and religion. In many ways, I was considered an outsider.

I was assigned to supervise the program in the city of Madinah which is one of the two holy and most important cities not only in Saudi Arabia but also for Muslims around the world. When I arrived in the city, my first and most important task was to know more about the city, its boundaries, regulations and my role in them. After meeting a doctor and professor at the Islamic university, I found out that I was not allowed to reside, visit or even walk in almost the entire city. My apartment needed to be located away from the precincts designed for Muslims, both native and converts. There were only a few local food restaurants and stores in my neighborhood. The services for those living in the area were very limited and some did not exist; for instance, there was no internet access and most businesses had low quality customer service policies.

The area had almost nothing to offer a professional who was hired to impact and make changes in the very places that he was not even allowed to visit. It was very hard to design a curriculum based on assumptions and not reality. I needed to know and experience personally

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what the students and the society needed from me. The main reason for the program was to provide students with the tools to be able to find a job after the program, but I was unaware what kind of market was available to them and the needs of the markets. I was completely isolated from the environment that I needed to help build or reconstruct. There was data that I did not have access to which was vital for the application of our curriculum. However, I needed to stay away from problems and be respectful at the same time. Unfortunately, this was not always possible.

After two months, I found out that 85% of our students had never been to a library, even though they were college graduates. I did research on the two local libraries and designed a plan to bring the students to visit them and to learn about the wealth of knowledge that these places provide to their visitors. I took the first group of students and on the day that I was to take the second and last group, I found out that the teachers and the students were unhappy that I had visited the libraries because they were within the boundaries within which I was not allowed. Probably out of respect for my position or maybe because he had a different perception of what was considered acceptable, the assistant who took me to make all the arrangements never told me anything. A challenging, but educational day! Despite the fact that I was looking for a way for the students to empower themselves by visiting the libraries, their understanding of the boundaries and the Islamic laws blinded them to my genuine and loyal aim to better their future. In their eyes I was breaking the law – in my eyes, I was trying to expand their horizons.

I could see clearly the difference in the staff's perceptions and understandings of some religious issues. In further discussions of the issue, I tried to convey the intentions behind my

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visit to those places and how beneficial it would have been for them. At the same time, I invited them all to deeply and consciously reflect on the reason for the existence of so much difference among them in the application of their understanding and beliefs of the religion.

These issues are representative of some of the challenges faced and the obstacles and constraints faced in the implementation of our curriculum in consideration of the importance of religion in Saudi Arabia. Overall, it was clearly necessary that re-adjustment of some strategies and techniques were needed to meet evolving principles and standards to produce the changes needed in the teaching and learning of English. The remaining chapters focus on the approaches used in our program to address these apparently competing priorities.

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Implementing the New Curriculum/Building the Community

The challenges encountered in the program had to be met head on in order for us to achieve success. In order to do so, we had to do two things – adjust the curriculum accordingly and create a community of professionals and learners who would work together to address the barriers to English language learning and cultural understanding. This chapter will explore in more depth some of these cultural, structural, and procedural challenges and solutions.

Teaching English to prepare students to face the 21st Century promotes independency, critical thinking, the use of portfolios and accountability from the students in order to become autonomous learners. Any syllabus needs to be supplemented by technology. Using smart boards, short clips, YouTube, Internet, smart phones, social websites and technology in general provide the necessary tools for a successful and long-lasting learning experience. Students are advised to:

Read local and national newspapers published in English.

Read valuable books in English.

Listen to the radio in English.

Watch the news.

Use notebooks to write new words.

Interact with foreigners whose native language is English.

Use English in stores where the personnel speak the language.

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The Cultural Mission also urges them to interact with native speakers of English or with the international community around them to improve their language skills and to better understand these societies.

All this information was very helpful to us to target in our teachings. It was also necessary for us to know about existing programs and the way they address students' needs and expertise. Getting information from the students themselves was crucial. Even though the government had their agenda for the program, we needed to know about the students' hidden or personal agendas. Most of them wanted to be able to communicate fluently and successfully in English. Others just wanted to get a certificate to add it to their existing CV. We were happy to know that many wanted to gain fluency in the language.

Making a comparison between L1 and L2, we perceived that our Saudi students would have to deal with a lot of challenges due to the differences between the two. They would encounter most problems in processing L2 in:

Grammatical structures

Pronunciation

Syntax

Morphology

Prepositions

The content of our program addresses all these differences to help students overcome the barriers. It is also based on a global perception and it has been articulated into specific and well stated goals and objectives. Our main objectives are listening and speaking; therefore, we

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engage the students in real world situations. One of the most important and difficult tasks had been developing appropriate teaching techniques as well as developing materials to support instruction.

Motivation – Professional or Personal

One hundred percent of the teachers went to teach in Madinah because of what the city represented to their religion. No one thought of the program as the main reason for them to be there; it seemed as though I was the only one who only went to focus on the professional aspects of the program and its goals. We needed to bring everyone together to work towards the same objectives. I began to draw on three factors:

1. My experiences as a teacher and learner and how they could help me attract and engage the teachers and the students.
2. My experiences working with diverse groups.
3. The teachers' personal agendas and their most successful teaching strategies or skills.

It was necessary for us to share our prior experiences and beliefs to create a learner-centered curriculum, to build a community of learners who support each other's learning process which emphasized cooperation and student participation in course content and assessment. Since our program was based on benchmarks, we had to work on developing course content relevant to the students' needs and to the staff's interest in incorporating sociocultural issues into second language learning. Having students' autonomy as part of our principles, we first had to have clear articulations of roles of teachers and students:

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1. **Students are managers of their own learning and resources to their peers.** Most of them found it strange (almost impossible) to learn the language without books. It was necessary for us to change their perception and to help them realize that a) every one of them represented a book, and b) they were also the most important resource and means of learning. This fear of not having a book was turned into a learning opportunity. The students would eventually be able to develop their own learning materials with structure from the teacher. They would choose themes or topics of interest and of high significance for them. This principle of the students' choice was applied to the organization of the course and classroom practice.
2. **Teachers are to act as curriculum designers, articulators of goals and objectives, enthusiastic resource coordinators of class activities, participants in the assessment process and co-learners.** Materials development is an important component of our planning process. Teachers have to constantly create unit and lessons within our resource book to carry out the goals and objectives of our course. This process makes our program more and more specific and requires dedication, time and creativity. These materials need to meet the students' needs and the country's laws as well as the religious aspect.

We understand that educational and linguistics beliefs can affect the designing of a lesson plan and of the course in general; in addition, the teacher's beliefs play an important role at each stage of the development of the program. Their beliefs may not always be present in higher or conscious thinking, but they may underlie the decisions

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they make. The situation gets more complicated and challenging when the beliefs are not only educational but religious. We needed to organize, negotiate and apply the program principles based specifically on teaching and learning scenarios. We had to leave politics and religion as far as we could from the most significant aims. Creating a teaching / learning community was a big challenge.

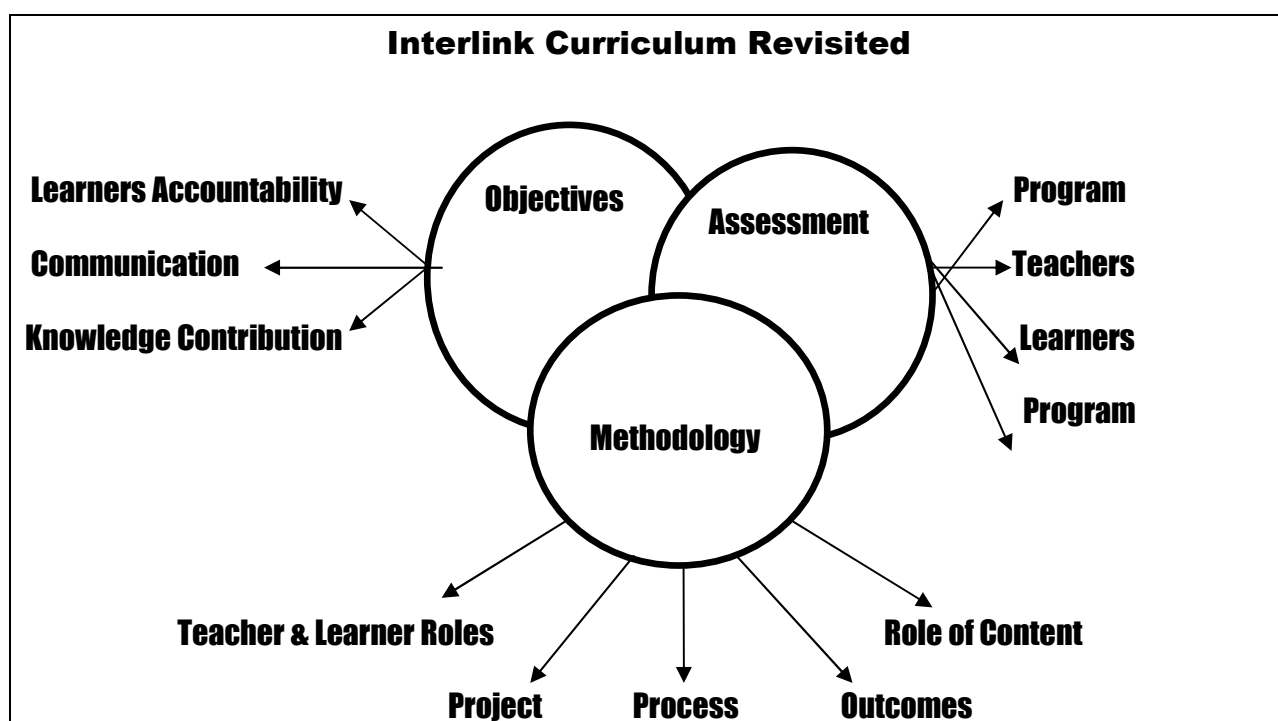


Figure 3. Model for Curriculum and Program Assessment (Hall, 2001, p.10)

Another important decision was to define the culture in which the students are to learn. The cultural experience should consist of the cultural content, the activities which engage this content, the outcomes that are intended to be achieved, the learning context and the nature of the relationship the teacher develops with students. (Moran, 2001, p.8) For our staff, it was easier to develop a sense of acceptance due to the sharing of religious beliefs with the students. In

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teaching culture and values of the language, the difficulty lies in the fact that the students hold tight to an identity from a culture that does not value the same ideals or qualities. Two questions came across during the process of making culture as an important part of our teaching:

1. How could we address the challenge of bringing the teachers' personal and cultural definitions if they come from cultural backgrounds such as Somali, Canadian, American, South African, British and Uzbekistani?
2. How could we teach culture to students and talk about the language-valued character qualities without threatening their cultural identity? (Moran, 2001, p.13)

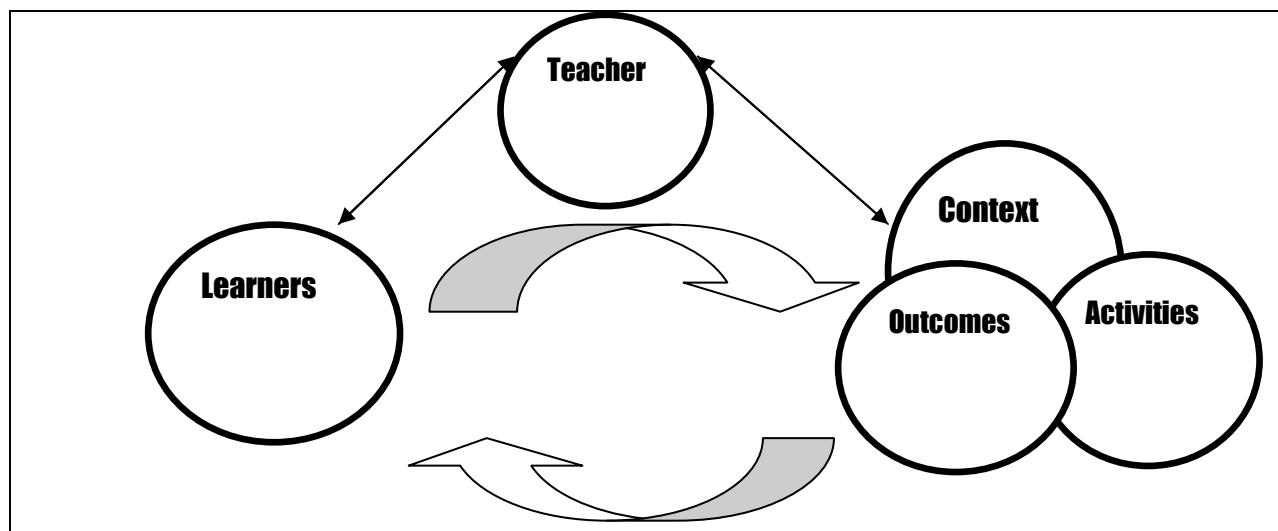


Figure 4: Approach to Ensuring Cultural Inclusion in Teaching

Though today English is part of the Saudi school's curriculum, has career value and offers social prestige, we must remember that most Islamic scholars fear that the introduction of English to all different school levels would lead to the Westernization of Arab children. A good balanced approach which would respect both cultures and their values should be implemented.

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We put all our perspectives together to develop an approach to teaching culture resulting in the model in Figure 4 above.

To deal with this in our Interlink schools, we posted two big signs which read “English Only Zone” but we also designed another one which read “Proud to be Saudi”. We collected newspaper and magazine articles with news from English-speaking people as well as Saudis and their achievements. We wanted to inculcate in their minds the idea of being open-minded and receptive and creating a school culture that recognized and respected others and the notion of living peacefully with people from other races and cultures. We also wanted to enrich both cultures.

Many of the students attended the program to get either of the two certificates that are offered. One is for participation and the other is for their grades and proficiency. We worked very hard on getting them to realize the importance of getting the skills in the language and how powerful and important the language can be to help them achieve their future goals.

We looked for a way to present a program full of learning opportunities using audio-visual materials with practical options for reading and writing which could fit well with the Saudi context. The program promotes group discussions, role play and the construction of a portfolio. We needed to put all the pieces together to create a plan in line with the pursuit of knowledge aiming at the higher goals of human welfare that are a part of Islamic history, culture and tradition which would provide a strong motivational drive among Saudis.

It was necessary for me as a supervisor to be more aware of culture and religion in order to make better and more suitable educational decisions. It was important to have staff meetings

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as well as individual, personal meetings with the teachers. This allowed me to get to know them as members of the team as well as unique individuals. Treating them individually would help me cultivate them as the group. I did the same thing with the two Saudi assistants that we had and with the Saudi administrator. These meetings in and out of the school helped me develop a more complete view of the religious perceptions from the natives and the foreigners who had converted into the religion.

My first impression was that converts were stricter and less flexible than the native born-Muslims when it came to accepting other people's ideas and viewpoints of the religion. It was important for me to add the fact that as a non-Muslim living in Madinah, I needed to play closer attention to the Islamic laws as well as the government's laws.

Most of the teachers would not accept any mistake from me concerning the city boundaries and my professional and personal decisions. On the other hand, my Saudi counterpart was more lenient and understanding and the assistants had the same flexible and open attitude. It was hard at first not knowing who to follow. I kept on asking about the Dos and Don'ts and listening to wide variety of interpretations. It made more sense to me to listen and follow native Muslims because they were born there and they had lived there all their lives; therefore, they knew how expats should conduct themselves in the society. They taught me a completely different view of the religion in a completely different manner. They became my main cultural and religious source of information while I would also go to the teachers to get the better of the two worlds. These communication channels were important to have a wider view of

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what the students needed to become active citizens in their society. The language that they needed had to tie as closely as possible to their real world.

I developed a professional and personal relationship with our learning-community members. I soon realized that my religious and moral values were not far apart from those of the native-born Muslims. We shared much of the most important values. As time went by, we all felt more comfortable with one another. I was still a bit concerned about certain things and I learned how to go to places without having any fear. At same time, I tried to avoid being in “the wrong place at the wrong time”. It was very important to build a religious and societal trust to continue designing and implementing our curriculum.

Creating Community through Policy and Process

An important part of my role as a leader was to plan strategically, to negotiate and to work on policy formation. My communication with the teachers needed to be open and based on true facts. They all came from the traditional school of teaching and their main concern from the very beginning was the transition to our new and innovative approach. I needed to be the catalyst for change and innovation. Teachers needed to be empowered. (Christison, 1997, p. iv)

To achieve this, I designed an approach that I hoped would address three levels of concern. It comprised:

1. **A Teacher Development Program (TD),**
2. **A Student Support Center (SC), and**
3. **An Open Staff Meeting/Counseling Session**

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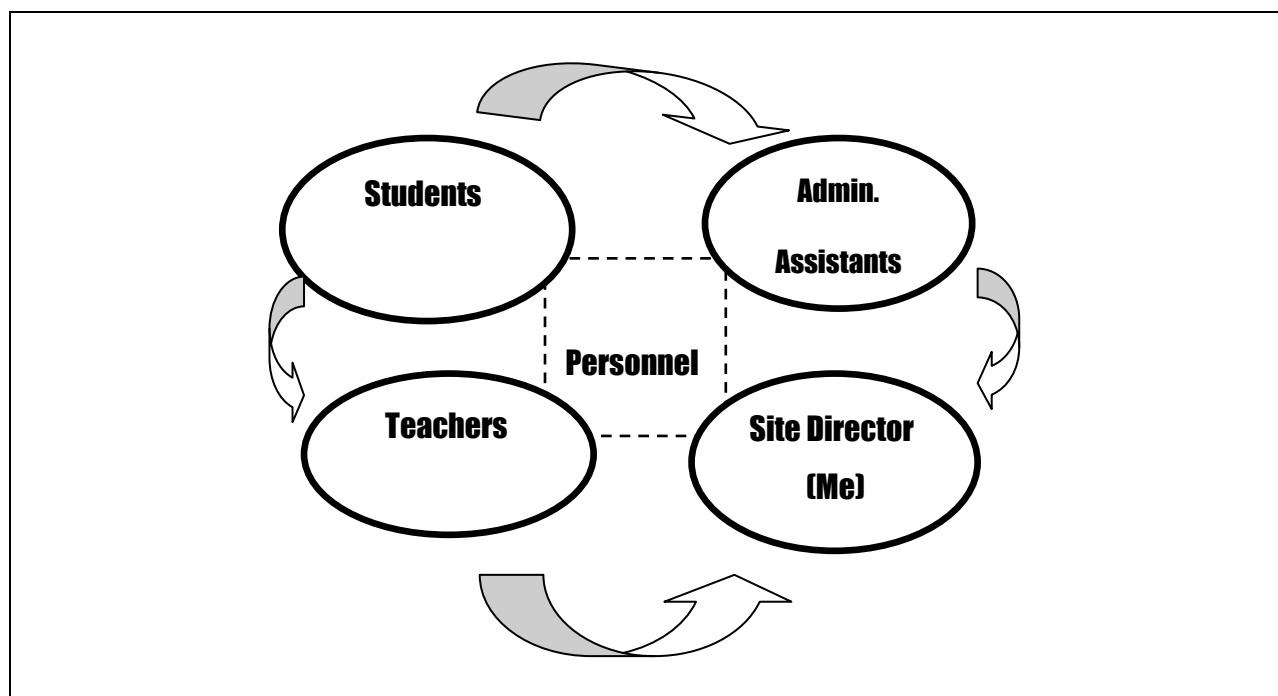


Figure 5: Internal Stakeholders in Program Policy Formation Process (Hall, 201, pp172-174)

For (TD), I created a webpage-forum where every teacher could post a theme or a thought for the others to provide any feedback. I would only participate at the end of every discussion to provide a summary. I would also step in if I saw that the discussion was leading to a disrespectful situation or when it was losing direction. I also assigned readings for the teachers to be discussed at the TD meeting. They all had a complete week to do any kind of research related to principles and goals of our program. We went in depth into the teaching methods and techniques which would help us become more effective humanistic teachers. Videos and model lessons were presented. Discussions among the group were always initiated. Anyone could bring any other topic which would help us as a team.

The Support Center (SC) was a way to help the students better understand the program and its goals and objectives better and to provide support to those struggling with the learning of

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the language. It was a great opportunity to help them realize their role in our program and the importance of their attitude towards the process. We also helped them realize that not having a book was an opportunity for them to choose what they wanted the teachers to teach. We had a lot of discussions on the meaning of the portfolio, its future use and its importance. We employed a Suggestopedia approach, a name coined by blending the two words 'suggestion' and 'pedagogy' and created by the Bulgarian psychotherapist Georgi Lozanov with the intended purpose enhancing language learning by tapping into the power of suggestion. In our program, one aspect of the approach that we utilized was creating a physical environment and atmosphere in the classroom to enhance student comfort and confidence by using huge posters on the walls with inspirational quotes. (Larsen-Freeman, 2000)

During the staff meetings, we would sit on a carpet to create a relaxed atmosphere where everybody felt free to express his feelings, achievements and concerns. We discussed possible ways to address many of the concerns and we designed the process to follow for the following week during TD. I brought agendas for the meetings during the first three months. After that, I gathered the necessary data and the community had been built, the agenda was created by the teachers and my participation devolved into announcing HR, Central and Main office information. I provided enough time every week for staff to reflect on every single aspect of our teaching and learning community.

Here I will include a brief essay written by one of the teachers to apply to an MA fellowship program. The essay has to be based on something that had impacted their life and

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their teaching. He decided to write about our program and my supervision, leadership and support in particular.

This is the program that we followed throughout the year. Many changes were made along the way while everybody felt responsible for the success of it. Every teacher was assigned to work on module based on skills he felt more comfortable with. These modules were to be presented and shared with the staff. Classes were in pairs. A teacher would work on a skill while the other would work on a different skill. Their lesson needed to be based on the same topic. Every teacher was responsible for helping and supporting each other.

Towards the end, many students could not actually believe that they had learned so much without using books. They liked the flexibility of the program even though they still had some questions about what to do after the program. Many thought that time went too fast and when they were more comfortable, it was time to go. (A. Al-Anqri, Personal Correspondence, 2012)

Every piece fell into place and we became a big family where our differences were respected and our skills and ideas were shared. I became a big brother to all the teachers and they kept coming to me individually to discuss any personal issues concerning their families or just to share what they wanted to do in the near or long-term future. As a group, we kept meeting every week either for SM or TD.

As a staff, we went through a lot of hard times to get to know one another and to see that we were all foreigners to the eyes of the native. We had different reasons for coming to the job and to the city and yet, we needed to hold hands to be able to succeed. What had been done as a team would help us continue our journey throughout the Kingdom.

My main goal was to create leaders not followers. I needed for them to have a clear idea of themselves; I needed them to be aware of their skills and limitations. Teachers were afraid of me leaving the program in Madinah. They wanted me to stay to continue working on their teaching and personal skills. I wanted to make sure that they understood how far we had come.

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We had planted a seed that they only needed to shelter, water and treat with passion. They were ready to continue flying with their own wings and during their journey to stop to help others in need. They had to constantly take a look at themselves and try to find the best ways to improve (Metacognition). They had to work on their social and affective domains to learn from others and to help others learn and finally to see their role in the program and how they could reach out to the community and beyond that to the world. Our main role was not only to teach English to the students but to empower them to create a better world where diversity becomes the means for us to attract one another and to draw us closer together.

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Next Station/Reflection

My work with Interlink has been a pilot project and the project will always be an evolving, ongoing process. The program is well-structured and our work has provided the essential components to allow for changes and to implement new ideas.

Every participant has to believe in it and team support is always a good idea. It presents challenges to the teachers as well as to the students. We still need to continue working with our partners in Saudi Arabia to understand that language acquisition should not be measured as other kinds of knowledge are measured. They still want to see numbers and an emphasis on grammar rules and declarative knowledge. We need to stand firmly and strongly believe and support the ideas, convictions, and strategies that have been proven successful. Constant communication and negotiation are the keys to arrival at a viable consensus.

After two years of developing and implementing the program, many changes have been made and we have seen some great results with the majority of the students. Despite this, we should not be lulled into a state of satisfaction and the false belief that it is good the way it is right now. The program should analyze and create more varied opportunities for those who feel they learned very little. Many questions need to be answered and those questions should guide and motivate us to continue making improvements.

We teach our classes on the college campuses and even the deans and teachers of other subjects not related to English have shown interest in our principles and request our assistance in transferring these principles into other subjects. Private and public universities have shown the

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same interest. This is a good sign! Outsiders perceive our technique as different but effective and useful.

The government is expanding the program to almost every city around the Kingdom and is opening the program for women as well. Our job gets more and more complex. We need to create more working groups and bring more people and ideas into our operations. We have to continue creating training and supportive groups for new teachers and employees in general. Our growth should be based on solid ground work of the right personnel and their training.

"The great aim of education is not knowledge but action." (Herbert Spencer)

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