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Negotiating Culture at a Women’s College in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Roles, Attitudes and Expectations

Fatin Abdal-Sabur

SIT Graduate Institute

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Negotiating Culture at a Women’s College in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia:
Roles, Attitudes and Expectations

Fatin Abdal-Sabur

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the SIT Graduate Institute, Brattleboro, Vermont

September 1, 2011

IPP Advisor: Dr. Patrick Moran
Reader: Rebecca Kent
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Student name: Fatin Abdal-Sabur

Date: September 1, 2011
Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the events that led to my separation from a women’s college in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It contains a narrative of the events that led up to this separation, an analysis of the reasons behind it and a final statement that describes how I have evolved personally and professionally since the events occurred. I argue that various conflicts between my role, attitude and expectations and those of the students and administration at the college led to a breakdown of communication between all parties. American cultural biases caused me to misinterpret signals of a positive rapport between me and my students. To explain this misinterpretation, I cite various differences in communication styles between American and Saudi culture. I also include a poll of my former colleagues that examines the motivations behind Saudi student behavior in the classroom. My findings will have implications for the way administrators of Saudi universities culturally debrief western teachers. My findings will also help those already teaching in Saudi Arabia to gain more insight into their own and their students’ motivations. Ultimately, the findings will help teachers and administrators in Saudi Arabia serve students more effectively.
ERIC Descriptors

Student Teacher Relationship
Teacher Attitudes
Teacher Behavior
Teacher Effectiveness
Teacher Role
Cultural Awareness
Culture Conflict
Intercultural Communication
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Introduction: Context, Rationale and Purpose

This paper describes events that occurred over the course of six months when I taught at Riyadh University\(^1\) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as part of a fellowship from the MAT Program at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont. Although my two cohorts and I were supposed to be at the college for 2 years, I was asked to leave after six months when some students complained that they were not learning in my class. Various factors including inexperience, culture shock and an unsupportive administration combined to create the lowest point in my brief career as an ESOL teacher, a moment where I failed to live up to expectations and was unable to carry out my responsibilities. This traumatic event led me to question my abilities as a teacher, a learner and as a cross cultural ambassador. Initially, I lacked understanding and insight into what exactly had gone wrong. It was necessary to examine this episode to prevent anything like it from reoccurring. Since I am committed to excellence in teaching and believe in the power of reflection when faced with a difficult question, the goal of this professional paper will be to define, explore and resolve what happened at Riyadh University in order to become a more effective teacher.

Riyadh University, formerly Riyadh College is located on the outskirts of the capital of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The University welcomed male students in 2004 and female students in 2006 to complete bachelors and masters programs in business administration, computer science and IT. Although the costs pale in comparison to American universities, tuition for the first semester at the College of Business Administration can reach $6,000 USD. Therefore, an RU student, ranging in age from 18 to 24, is typically both ambitious and wealthy. However, before students may begin their major course of study, they must complete a

\(^1\) In the interest of anonymity, pseudonyms have been used for all people and institutions.
preparatory year program (PYP) in English, which is provided in partnership with the Saudi Language Group.

Riyadh University is one of many colleges and universities that were created as part of the Tatweer movement for education reform, which was spearheaded by King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz in 2006 to prepare young Saudis to enter the workforce (McEvers, 2009). Most of these colleges and universities provide a western-style curriculum delivered largely by instructors from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and other English-speaking countries.

Before arriving in Riyadh, I had only a vague understanding of what this reform movement really entailed. Instead, the head of Saudi Language Group, Yasir Ali, encouraged me to learn more about Saudi culture in general. Initially, I saw myself as somewhat of a cultural ambassador. My students would teach me something about Saudi culture and I would teach them about life in the United States. Aside from that, I sought to avoid making any cultural faux pas and to be an effective teacher. At the time, I had no idea how problematic defining the term “effective teacher” would become.

One of the main tasks of this paper is to examine how differing views of what makes an effective teacher caused conflict and misunderstanding between me and my students. Initially, I wanted to find out why my experience at Riyadh University turned out so poorly. I wanted to answer three basic questions: What happened? Why did it happen? How can I avoid making the same mistakes in the future? As I started to explore these questions, I discovered that the conflict I experienced had everything to do with contrasting cultures: Saudi Arabia/United States; SIT/Riyadh University; Saudi classroom/American classroom. My cultural biases and lack of information about cultural differences caused me to be an ineffective teacher.
This is an important topic to explore because the demand for English teachers in Saudi Arabia is huge and many educators are considering going there lacking crucial information about how cultural differences play out in the classroom. A lot of emphasis is placed on general aspects of Saudi culture like the centrality of Islam, gender segregation and the treatment of women. As a result, the cultural debriefing for many teachers, especially women, is focused mostly on how to dress modestly or how to avoid the *mutawa* (religious police). This is crucial information, to be sure, but an implied argument of this paper is that it is just as important for teachers to be educated about cultural differences in the classroom. How do Saudi students communicate? How do they show that they are listening? How do they show respect for their instructor? What kinds of curriculum and pedagogical practices are they used to and how does the typical Western view of “good teaching” contrast with them? What are some potential causes for conflict in the classroom and when they arise, how should they be handled? These are all crucial questions that should be part of how Saudi colleges and universities prepare their Western teachers; they are also questions that this paper will attempt to answer.

Based on the above rationale, the intended audience for this paper is TESOL teachers who are considering working in Saudi Arabia or the Middle East, teachers who already work in these areas and university administrators who are in charge of preparing Western teachers for entering their new classrooms. Teachers considering taking a job at a Saudi university will gain insight into potential challenges that they may face in the classroom. Teachers who already work in Saudi Arabia will be able to look at their experience and see how answering the above questions can help them become more effective, culturally savvy teachers and maintain an atmosphere of mutual understanding with their students. University administrators will be exposed to a different perspective on the preparation process and will hopefully take into account
some of the current gaps in information to make sure that their teachers feel secure and prepared so that all parties can serve students in the most effective way possible. Anyone reading this paper will receive unprecedented access into the personal story of a woman who taught in Riyadh for six months and how this affected her professional goal to achieve excellence and insight into the TESOL teaching profession.

The first section of the paper contains a narrative of the events that led to my arrival in Saudi Arabia and my separation from Riyadh University. It describes why I decided to pursue an MA in TESOL, how I made the decision to pursue the Saudi Arabia fellowship, how I prepared for arriving in Riyadh, my first impressions of students and administrators and the conflict that led to my being asked to leave my post at the women’s college.

The second chapter is an analysis of the events described in the first chapter and it attempts to explain what went wrong and why these events occurred. It also discusses my role and expectations and those of students and administrators. I suggest that the differences between our roles, expectations and communication styles led to the misunderstanding that caused students to become dissatisfied with my class. I gain insight into students’ behaviors and perspectives by conducting an informal poll of my former colleagues. Finally, the chapter discusses how Saudi education reform affected what the administration of the college expected from me.

The third and final chapter discusses how I have evolved personally and professionally since the events described, which took place between December 2008 and June 2009. It also discusses the attitudes and practices that I will adopt to make sure that a similar conflict does not occur in the future. It contains a brief discussion of my current teaching context and how its
differences with Riyadh University have helped me achieve a new degree of success in the classroom.
Chapter One: Narrative of Events

In 2006, I received a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from the University of Pittsburgh. During the MFA program, and even after graduation, I taught composition and creative writing classes. However, in 2007 I decided to take a break from teaching because it had started to cause a terrible amount of stress and no longer made me happy. By the summer of 2008, I had been living in Pittsburgh, PA for five years and was working as an administrative assistant at Carnegie Mellon University. I took a job that was completely unrelated to my degree because I wasn’t sure I was really committed to teaching poetry or doing what it would take to get a full-time job, i.e. publishing my poems. I was also suffering from depression and anxiety, which made it very difficult to make a decision about what to do. I eventually became fed up with this situation and decided it was time for a change.

I did a lot of thinking during that time and considered several different career paths. Should I go back to publishing (my first career track after graduating college)? Should I go back to school for a master’s degree in film studies? After a lot of thinking I decided that teaching was the only profession that I could really see myself doing. But something about my teaching experience up until that point bothered me. First of all, I had received very little training. As a second year MFA student, I had basically been thrown into a composition classroom with zero teaching experience. It was a real sink or swim situation. Secondly, without a lot of effort to publish my poems, I knew I would be relegated to teaching composition, a prospect that did not excite me.

So I knew I wanted to teach, but what? I definitely wanted real teacher training, a graduate program that would teach me the nuts and bolts of this profession: lesson planning, classroom management, etc. I thought I was a bad teacher and that I needed this kind of training
in order to improve. I also knew that I was dedicated to the English language; using English properly was a value of mine. I also wanted to travel, perhaps rekindle my language studies and experience foreign cultures. So after some thought, I decided to go into ESL teaching. After doing some research online, I came across the program at SIT, but I did not apply right away. Instead I signed up for more information and soon people from the school were calling me to answer my questions and personally invite me to apply. It was during this time that I first corresponded with Thomas Warfield and finally decided to apply to SIT.

As I began to make the preparations to leave Pittsburgh, I began an e-mail correspondence with Thomas where he explained the Saudi Language Group/Riyadh University fellowship for SIT students. It sounded like a great deal: 50% tuition discount, teaching experience, a chance to see the world and a guaranteed job at the end of the year. I was so happy because it seemed like what I was imagining had just materialized. It was my ticket out of Pittsburgh, my chance to travel, to finally get some concrete, specific teacher training. It was a way out of my rut, my depression that had been weighing me down for so long. Finally, I had something to look forward to. My life was going somewhere! I was really excited about this new prospect, my new career and the incredible adventure that awaited me in Saudi Arabia.

During this time, I also began a correspondence with Yasir Ali, the director of Saudi Language Group. He congratulated me on being accepted to the fellowship, answered some of my questions and made sure I knew what I was getting into. He gave me several resources and web links to find out more about Saudi culture, cultural expectations and the SLG/Riyadh University teaching philosophy. He told me I would be required to wear an abaya (a long, black robe) and a head scarf. He especially counseled me about how to deal with female Saudi students. “Remember, you’re not there to liberate them,” he told me, as if I would come in with
some Western, feminist idea that Saudi women were oppressed and that teaching them was my chance to set them free. He also advised me to list my religion as Muslim on my visa. As a Christian with a Muslim name, I suppose he thought this would prevent a lot of confusion and cultural conflict.

Despite the discussions with Yasir Ali, I really didn’t know a lot about Saudi Arabia before arriving there. My first feelings when Thomas told me about the fellowship were apprehension and a little fear. All I knew was that Saudi Arabia was far away in the Middle East and that it shared a border with Iraq. With the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan raging, this was a part of the world I thought people should generally avoid. So my first thoughts were “Is this a good idea? Will I be safe?” Thomas did a good job of assuaging my fears, urging me to learn more about the country and do more research before passing judgment. So that’s what I did. I read everything about Saudi Arabia that I could get my hands on: history books, guidebooks, internet articles, etc. I also became fascinated by Muslim women’s clothing. I knew I would have to find an abaya or at least something long, black and conservative to wear on the plane. During the months leading up to my departure, I spent hours online researching Muslim women’s clothing and all the beautiful colors and styles that were out there. I found them quite lovely and was excited at the prospect of wearing them. I became especially interested in the Islamic bathing suit, a really archaic looking garment that was like a knee-length scuba suit with a loose tank top over it to conceal the contours of the body. Other styles looked more like a track suit or jogging suit; I couldn’t imagine any woman wearing this thing in the water!

So there was my fear of travelling to the Middle East and my excitement and fascination with Muslim women’s clothing. However, there was one concern that I am not sure I shared with Thomas: I wondered if I would be ready to teach university-level ESL after only one semester in
the program. I don’t think the fact was lost on anyone that this fellowship was accepting teachers with very little ESL experience. In my defense, I had already completed a Master’s program in English (the MFA in creative writing) and had been teaching composition, literature and creative writing since 2004. Also, as a junior in college, I had spent a year living and studying in Dakar, Senegal and was quite proficient in French. I had foreign language and cross cultural experience, qualities that must have made me a more attractive candidate for the fellowship. However, there was still the fact that I had voluntarily been out of the classroom for almost a year. Despite my background, with no experience in the field of ESL, would I really be ready to teach at Riyadh University? I can only assume what must have motivated Thomas to recommend me as a student and for Yasir Ali to accept me to teach in his program. In hindsight, the application and acceptance process seemed to happen very quickly. I think a lot of assumptions were made about my ability to teach ESL at a university and to be able to adapt to Saudi culture. A lot of Yasir’s work had already been done for him. In other words, if we were good enough to be accepted to SIT, we were good enough to teach at Riyadh University.

A few weeks after I left Pittsburgh and returned home to New Jersey, I received my official SIT acceptance letter in the mail. It was real. In September, I would be moving to Brattleboro, VT to complete my first semester in the MA TESOL program at the SIT Graduate Institute. At the end of December, I would board a plane to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia with a stopover in Germany. I was to teach at Riyadh University from December 2008 to June 2009, at which point I would return to Brattleboro to complete the second and final semester of the MAT program. (At this point, I would become a SMAT, joining the Summer Masters in Teaching program.) Once the summer semester was over, I would return to Riyadh where I had a guaranteed job until 2011.
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The first semester at SIT is one that I remember fondly. It was really exciting and empowering to be at a school with so many like-minded people. Almost everyone was dedicated to a teaching career, wanted to travel or was multi-lingual. There were people who had studied French like me. There was even a student who had spent time in Senegal and also knew a little Wolof. I felt like I was part of a community; I had a little family with my five housemates. I felt loved, accepted and appreciated. Classes were challenging and I still had symptoms of depression, but I was hopeful and excited about what I would encounter in Riyadh.

Eventually the semester ended, and I went home to NJ to wait for my departure date. The day came, but it turned out that I had the departure time wrong. I was filled with dread when I realized the mistake. I knew I would never make it to the airport in time. I told my family. We zipped up my bags, threw them in the car and headed to the airport. We arrived about 2 hours later than we should have. There was no way I would be leaving for Riyadh that day. In addition to this confusion, I had been struck with a serious stomach virus several days before. Hours of vomiting led to a 12 hour stay in the emergency room at the hospital. The timing was terrible, but I recovered. After a couple of days of rest and sorting out a new flight, I was finally on my way to Riyadh.

The flight was pretty uneventful. I remember the strange looks I got coming out of the airplane bathroom after having done a quick change into the abaya. I remember arriving at the airport and being sternly questioned by some officials needing to make sure that I, a woman traveling alone, had a sponsor. I was met by two current Riyadh University teachers, Risa and Rahid who gave me money, a cell phone and told me I would be staying in a hotel for the night. Before actually making it to Riyadh University there would be my huge, 2 bedroom apartment, lots of shopping and a general feeling of wonder. I couldn’t believe I was in Saudi Arabia.
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My first day at the university was pretty anti-climactic. We didn’t have any students yet. The atmosphere seemed really relaxed. Teachers milled around without much to do. I don’t think the administrators had enough classes for me. I was told I would be team teaching with Kathleen, an infamous student from a previous class at SIT who was known for having conflicts with the administration. The two of us were sent to our classroom to start preparing. We briefly talked about our class, but the conversation didn’t get very far. I was clueless, kind of in shock and she seemed more interested in giving me the lowdown on the situation I had just gotten myself into. “Yasir Ali is a liar,” she told me. “He made so many promises to me. Told me I’d have guaranteed childcare for my daughters. None of it was true. This program is going under. SIT should really think twice about sending more people here.” I was flabbergasted. I had been on campus for barely half an hour and my mind was already being poisoned by gossip. I was scared. What had I gotten myself into? At the same time, I remember making a conscious choice not to listen to all the negative talk. I had not come half way around the world to give up and be turned away by gossip. I wanted to make the best of my time at RU. But most of all, I wanted to make my own judgments and not be swayed by other people’s complaints. I really resented Kathleen’s behavior that first day. She took away my ability to make my own first impression. She basically told me I was doomed. But it wasn’t just Kathleen. I quickly learned that most of the teachers had very low morale. People complained about everything. Rumors were rampant: the school was running out of money, Dr. Saleh, the dean, was seriously under-qualified and it was really Daisy, one of the more experienced teachers, who was running the show.

When I finally got in the classroom, I felt a lot of pressure. There was no true curriculum, only a vague set of “benchmarks” and themes for each level. And even those, it seemed, were constantly being revised. Aside from that, the content, projects, assignments, and lesson plans
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were completely up to the teacher. The Saudi Language Group curriculum guide justified this by saying it wanted to give teachers maximum freedom:

This curriculum is therefore, intentionally constructed to give precedence to pedagogical ideas instead of telling the teacher what to do in class. It is hoped that this approach is more empowering to the teacher and will provide the utmost freedom to meet the learning needs of the students.

This sounded pretty good in the SLG curriculum guide, but in reality it felt more like reinventing the wheel every day. We were discouraged from using textbooks since “covering specified materials in a textbook does not constitute learning.” With no textbook or set curriculum to lean on, I felt overwhelmed almost from day one. I was so concerned with just filling up class time and making sure students had something to do for every single minute. Also, the administration seriously frowned upon ending classes early. They were known for making impromptu visits and lurking in the hallways around the end of each period. They were watching us. On one occasion I was reprimanded by Martha, my advisor, for letting class out early.

I was so worried about using up the time, that I had no clear idea about what the point was. I was good at thinking up games, projects, and activities. But what was the goal? Why did I make these choices? In fact, during Martha’s class visits, that was her number one question. “Great idea, but what’s your goal?” I had no clue. For some reason, I was unable to take a step back and look at my classes objectively, to really think about what exactly I wanted to accomplish. I felt like I was flying blind.

With all the rumors and dissatisfaction among the teachers, there was a lot of conflict. Some people just did not like each other. It was hard to know who to trust, so I limited my circle to Jumana and Erica, my fellow SIT teachers, and Martha. I remember saying to her in an early e-mail, “I feel like I don’t know what I am doing.” I was being my usual honest self and opening
up to someone whose job it was to counsel me. Little did I know, but those words would come back to haunt me.

Along with feeling constantly unprepared, I was also struggling with relating to the students. As soon as I arrived at Riyadh University I learned that in KSA expectations for teacher and student behavior were much different than in the United States. My first impression of the Saudi students was that they talked too much. During class discussions they would talk amongst themselves. During quiet brainstorming sessions, they would talk. Worst of all, they would talk while I was talking. It seemed nearly impossible for them to be quiet. Initially, I found this behavior quite irritating and rude. I got the distinct impression that the students were not listening to me and were being quite disrespectful. I would try to reason with them by having discussions about active listening. I tried explaining that it was impossible talk and truly listen at the same time. Some of them actually tried to argue that this was not true!

I started out with good intentions, with a heart open and willing to get to know my students, but after this aspect of them became truly clear, I realized, to my dismay, that I didn’t like them very much. After some thought, however, I changed my mind. The realizations that they were talkers came early on during my time at RU. As I got to know my students more and learn actual details of their lives, I began to realize that they weren’t trying to be rude. They actually respected my authority and were aware of the hierarchy between student and teacher. I came to the conclusion that I had to accept them as they were. I had to stop trying to change them. Hadn’t I just learned about monochronic and polychronic cultures in a course called “Intercultural Communication for Language Teachers”? I figured Saudi Arabia was a polychronic culture and that I had to get over it. Instead of punishing and resenting them for their
talking nature, I had to use it to my advantage by incorporating more speaking-based activities in the classroom.

Talking allowed for some real moments of connection between my students and me. Aside from the difficulties I was having as a teacher, I did truly want to get to know them. After all, one of my main motivations for accepting the fellowship was the chance to get to know Saudi people. It turned out that they were as curious about me as I was about them. They asked me a lot of questions like, “Miss, why aren’t you married?” and “What do Americans think about Saudi Arabia?” On this topic, they were convinced of two things. Firstly, Americans thought Saudis rode camels and lived in the desert. Second, they thought Saudi women were oppressed. We discussed these topics often, despite the fact that teachers were discouraged from discussing “political issues” in class. If there was downtime in class or if I just couldn’t think of anything else to do, we would just talk. We had some great discussions. I remember a moment in my Level 6 writing class where we were discussing marriage customs in Saudi Arabia and how young women go about finding a husband. One student, Randa, explained to me that she had met her husband for the first time when she was 16. She was at a wedding when her husband’s mother spotted her. After observing and talking to her, she thought Randa would make a wonderful wife for her son. At 23, Randa had been married for 6 years and had two small children. So young! So much responsibility! It immediately became clear to me why Randa was one of the most dedicated and determined students in my class. Despite having a family to tend to, she still managed to take her studies very seriously. As I listened to Randa’s story and the other students’ comments, I began to compare her story to marriage practices in the United States. Finding a husband seemed so easy! All you had to do was wait for someone’s mother to pick you out of the crowd. I was amazed that women did not choose their husbands. Later my
students assured me that no Saudi woman they knew of would ever marry someone she didn’t like. If she did not like the man her family had chosen for her, she could simply refuse him. The women in my classes were not oppressed wall flowers. They spoke with confidence, openness and honesty.

In this instance, I was very proud of the rapport I had with my students. For the most part, I felt that I liked them and that they liked me. However, in one of my later classes, this rapport started to break down. I was surprised and concerned when I found out that a group of students had gone to an administrator to complain about me and about the class. It’s hard to remember everything that I was told, but, simply put, the students who complained felt they weren’t learning anything in my class.

I think it’s fair to say that I had been struggling from the beginning. However, I was also being consistently observed by my advisor, Martha. She did a great job of pointing out my strengths, i.e. my excellent rapport with students, my encouraging them to reflect on the purpose of and their experience of each activity. She also urged me to explore the other end of the spectrum, what she called “intelligent actions,” not weaknesses. She asked questions that were meant to help me reflect on ways to make classes more effective: What are your expectations for students? How do the activities in your class tie into reading and writing skills and the objectives in the class? How can you harness students’ talkativeness and make sure no one dominates class discussion? She specifically suggested that I keep a teaching journal to reflect on all of these questions. I made a few entries, but was never consistent with it. Looking back at my notes, I had a lot of smart, concrete ideas on what I expected from students. I also constantly brainstormed on activities I wanted to do in class. However, the notes start off energetic, specific, confident and then slowly get vaguer, sketchy, awkward, self-conscious, and apologetic. During late March and
early April of 2009, interspersed with activity ideas and notes on how class went are entries like
the following: “I am wasting their time and I feel really bad about it. Sorry.” “I’m glad when the
class is over. I wanna get out of here.” Looking back at these notes, something was clearly going
wrong. However, at the time, I really didn’t have a sense of how serious the problem was or what
was really at stake.

After the students complained about my class, I suspect there were some meetings that
went on where the administrators and senior teachers/advisors discussed how to handle my
situation. It was decided that Brenda, one of the more experienced teacher/advisors, would sit
down with me and discuss some strategies for improvement. My memories of this meeting are
sketchy, but I believe it focused on ways to make students’ essays more fun and interesting, ways
to make my classes more stimulating and for students to take more responsibility for their
writing. Basically, Brenda gave me a bunch of worksheets on essay organization, hyperbole,
personification and a list entitled “Things I Can Do to Make My Essays Better.” I was only
somewhat reassured by this meeting, yet I was still not worried; I thought I had plenty of time to
sort things out.

The problems in this specific class had been occurring all semester, but by the time the
students complained and Brenda and I had our meeting, the term was over. It was time for new
classes. In this new term, I wasn’t doing much teaching. My hours had been drastically reduced.
I had one level 2/3 communication course and a few hours in the workroom for the newly
designed remedial program. Essentially, this was a program where struggling students would get
extra help. It was in its embryonic stages at that point so there weren’t very many students for us
to work with. Luckily, Erica and I had been assigned to cover the remedial program during the
same time. The days were long and dull. We were told to look online for exercises to give our
students when they finally showed up. Erica and I finally decided that our new assignment was nothing more than busy work and an attempt to save face lest it appear that we SIT fellows were not being put to good use.

During this time I felt bored, frustrated, stuck, as if I were just going through the motions. Except for that one oral communication class (which was comprised of employees of Riyadh University), I hardly ever saw students, so I didn’t have much to do. I remember spending a lot of time in my office surfing the internet and checking e-mail. One day during this period I received an e-mail from William Speck, requesting that I meet with him, Dr. Saleh, Brenda and Daisy, the two head teacher/advisors. My instincts immediately told me that something was up. Bill Speck was one of the highest ranking administrators at RU. He was the person who had coordinated my hiring, including signing the official letter that invited me to work at the university. Why would he contact me unless something was wrong?

On the day of the meeting I had to travel to the men’s campus which is where the main administrative offices of Riyadh University were located. I was waiting for what seemed like an eternity when I saw one of my colleagues, Ellen, leaving the room I was about to enter with a strange look on her face. As she passed by, she gave me a strained, yet polite smile. All I knew about Ellen was that she was very nice and that she was never in her office. Later, I found out that she had just been fired. Finally, Brenda called me into the room. As I followed her, she muttered under her breath, “This sucks.” What was going on? I went into the room where Bill Speck, Dr. Saleh, Brenda and Daisy were seated around a large, wooden table. None of them would maintain eye contact with me and all of them looked very tense and somber. I took my seat opposite them and waited anxiously for what they were about to tell me. There was no small talk. Instead, Speck cut to the chase with the news that I was not deemed a good fit for the
program and that I would not be returning after the summer semester at SIT was complete. Dr. Saleh, Brenda and Daisy said nothing. I was shocked. Of course I was aware that there was a problem, but I was working on it. What about my meeting with Brenda and the strategies I was supposed to try out? I thought I would have more than a few weeks to improve. They weren’t even giving me a chance. Why hadn’t I been warned or put on probation? What would happen to my funding? The entire situation was completely unfair and went directly against the protocol that SIT and ALG/RU had agreed upon.

On the way home, I kept quiet until the bus arrived at our apartment. As everyone started to get off, I told Erica and Jumana that I had something to tell them and asked them to stop by my apartment after they got settled. Later, when I told them that I had been fired, they seemed stunned and a bit sad. Then they got angry. “They can’t do this to you.” They immediately started to strategize about how they would help me get my job back. It was their idea to ask for a meeting with Yasir Ali. We spent hours preparing talking points, including a list of demands for how future teacher infractions should be handled; there should be warnings or a probation system and students who are accepted to the fellowship should have a guarantee that their funding will not be taken away unless a serious offense has been committed.

Later, during the meeting with Yasir, we calmly and clearly made our case, but he would have none of it. There was no explanation for why the protocol was not followed and not even a hint of an apology for the unfairness of the proceedings. As justification, Dr. Saleh directly quoted from an early e-mail that I had written to Martha, my advisor: “I feel like I don’t know what I am doing.” A moment of vulnerable reflection (Hadn’t SIT taught me how to reflect?), a private correspondence had been used against me. Martha had betrayed me. I had considered her my confidante, supporter and protector. Hadn’t anyone come to my defense? No, according to
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Yasir, I didn’t deserve defending; everything was my fault. I was not dedicated to the students; I didn’t care enough to ask for help. (Wasn’t my statement to Martha a way of “asking for help”?) He questioned my dedication to teaching itself and even my acceptance to SIT! His arrogance and refusal to admit any wrongdoing was shocking. Dr. Saleh tried to soften the blows by saying, “You’re not a bad teacher. We just don’t think you’re right for our program.” What did any of them know about what kind of teacher I was? No one but Martha had ever visited my classroom. Questioning my dedication to teaching and my acceptance to SIT was hugely insulting and hurtful. And, although it was meant to be reassuring, Dr. Saleh’s statement hurt as well. Their impression of me was baseless, superficial and just plain wrong. At the time, however, I did not fully realize this. During the lowest point of my career and maybe even of my life, I felt attacked, demeaned and abandoned. At that moment, as a teacher and as a human being, I felt so small, as insignificant as a speck of dust.
Chapter 2: Interpretation and Analysis of Events

This chapter serves as an attempt to analyze the events that led to my departure from Riyadh University. It compares and contrasts, in detail, the various roles and expectations of the students, instructor (me) and administration. The central aspects of this chapter include a discussion of the connection between the role of students and the rapport I had with them as their teacher. Another central aspect is the difference in communication styles between Saudi and American culture. There are many intriguing differences, but this chapter will focus only on direct and indirect communication styles. Finally, there is a brief discussion of Saudi educational reform and how it affected my role in the classroom and the administration’s expectations of me. I propose that being more aware of the implications of this reform movement would have helped ease the misunderstandings experienced. The underlying framework for the entire section is an informal poll that I made for some of my former colleagues in which I asked them to comment on Saudi students perceived opinions on teacher/student roles, handling of conflict and awareness of their influence on the administration.

There are many reasons why I believe my experience at Riyadh University was unsuccessful. As I initially prepared to leave for Riyadh, I had many reservations. Would I be safe there? Would I be ready to teach ESL after only one semester at SIT? Along with the reservations, however, I also had a lot of hopes and expectations. I saw myself as a student who was undergoing training to become a better teacher in general and, more specifically, a language teacher.
Differing Perceptions of My Role

I came to SIT with a certain set of knowledge and experiences that I expected would be improved upon as I went through the program. Although a student must take an active role in their own education as far as classes and assignments are concerned, my role was also passive in that I expected to be helped, guided and encouraged. In other words “SIT is going to give me A, B and C which will ultimately make me a competent language teacher.” I primarily saw myself as a student, especially since I had only gone through one semester at SIT. I brought this identity and self-assigned role with me to Riyadh University. My experience there was challenging from the very beginning. Naturally, I was concerned about this, but I was not overly worried. I expected to be at the school for 2 years; I expected to have plenty of time to improve and that I would receive lots of guidance and encouragement.

So who was I at Riyadh University, a master’s student or a professional teacher? This conflict came up during the final meeting I had with Yasir Ali. In his view, I was not a student, but a professional with responsibilities and expectations to live up to. There would be no hand-holding; if I was not able to meet the requirements of the job, then I did not deserve to remain on the staff. In a way, his perspective is understandable. Yasir and Saudi Language Group had spent a lot of time and resources to hire me, a person who had already completed an MA program, had 3 years of teaching experience and had been accepted to SIT, an institution that shared a lot of values with Saudi Language Group. On paper, at least, I should have been able to do the job, but I wasn’t. Despite Yasir’s initial view of me as a teacher, I did not have the experience necessary to be successful at Riyadh University. So, perhaps the difficulties I faced there stemmed from the differing expectations of my role; I saw myself foremost as student, while I was being held to the standards of an experienced, professional ESOL teacher. Conflict
surrounding differing expectations of the students’ role also contributed to the problems I had in the classroom.

**My Expectations of Students**

When I decided to pursue a career as an ESOL teacher, I always saw myself teaching college students or adults. I looked forward to being in a classroom full of dedicated, motivated, responsible people who understood that success meant coming to class on time, turning in homework assignments and following the teacher’s directions. I wanted my students to take an independent role in their own learning and I wanted their behavior to reflect their respect for the class and their desire to learn. I wanted to have a connection with my students, to share personal stories and, to the extent that this was possible, be their friend.

However, when I stepped into my classroom at RU, I was disappointed because the students did not meet my expectations. They talked in Arabic constantly and did not seem to listen or to follow directions. Some students left their designer sunglasses on or played with their cellphones under their desks. Basically, they seemed very disrespectful and I did not like them. I felt disappointed and worried that my first impression of them was so negative. It is clear to me now that I was judging my Saudi students by American cultural standards. This was the best I could do, as no one had explained Saudi students’ behavior or classroom personalities to me. There was no way for me to prepare for what I would encounter or to adapt my teaching style and perceptions.

**Differing Perceptions of Teacher-Student Rapport**

Although I’d had a negative impression of the students in my first semester classes, in the second semester I finally met a group of students I felt somewhat connected to. I was happy; at least my desire to have a positive rapport was being realized. Yet, this was the group of students
that played a major role in my firing when they complained about me. Clearly, the rapport that I had perceived was invisible to them or at least being misinterpreted. Most likely, this difference in interpretations had to do with the difference in communication styles between my students and me and differing cultural perceptions of what good students and teachers do. Basically, my students and I had different views on what talking and sharing personal details meant. I saw our conversations in class as a rapport builder and something that strengthened our relationship.

However, the students saw it differently. So, when we discussed marriage practices and Randa, a student, told her personal story, perhaps she was just being polite. Perhaps they didn’t see talking as a way to create closeness. Perhaps they didn’t even consider becoming close to someone like a teacher. After all, it always seemed that the students were aware of the hierarchy between students and teacher. When talking with me, perhaps they were just being respectful.

Furthermore, this was a writing class and although the students were willing participants in these personal conversations, they were still unrelated to what we should have been discussing. Therefore, even though we learned some interesting facts about American and Saudi views of marriage, it is not surprising that the students still felt they were not learning anything meaningful. In other words, our sharing personal details and becoming closer did not mean that the students were satisfied with me or with the class.

In order to explore the reasons behind this apparent difference in views, I made an informal poll of seven of my former colleagues from Riyadh University whose experience teaching Saudi students ranged from 2 years to over 10. I was sure that their amount of experienced qualified them to give insightful answers to my questions:

- What are Saudi students’ expectations of the student/teacher relationship?
• How do Saudi students behave when there is conflict in the classroom? Would they confront the teacher directly?

• Are students aware of the influence they have over the administration?

Out of the seven colleagues polled, only four responded, with one objecting to the poll itself. This person was put off by the questions and claimed that I was confusing English teachers with sociologists. She told me that there is a range of levels of ability and motivation in classrooms all over the world and that we should not try to stereotype our students’ attitudes or behavior. To preface my other colleagues’ statements, I have no interest in vilifying Saudi Arabian students or in blaming them for my negative experience at RU. Lest the following comments sound like stereotypes, I want to point out that there are always exceptions to the rule. The various themes amongst the responses reflect perceived trends in attitudes and behavior.

**Other Interpretations of the Students’ Role**

A discussion of teacher-student rapport and, more specifically, teachers’ and students’ expectations of each other, will help shed light on the difficulties in my classroom. My students and I engaged in conversations that taught us more about each other’s cultures, especially concerning marriage rituals. These discussions were important because, in my view, a good teacher cares about her students as people. And that teacher shows her care and concern by listening to her students and showing interest in their personal lives. However, based on the experiences of my American colleagues, we can assume that some Saudi students have very different ideas of what makes a good teacher. For example, a good teacher will most likely lead them confidently, tell them how to get a good grade, motivate and convince them to work hard and, finally, negotiate and collaborate with them on rules, grades, etc.
Concerning the first poll question, two of the respondents agreed that Saudi students took a dependent role in the classroom. The first respondent wrote the following:

I think that Saudi students expect the teacher to explain things in various ways, over and over again. I think they also expect YOU to follow up with them and keep asking them to do their work. I also think that it is also expected that the teacher "take care" of them and coerce or coddle them into performance. In my opinion the students feel their own role is to simply show up to class. The rest of the work falls upon the teacher. Meaning that the student doesn’t feel they have to be prepared or even motivated, they feel that the teacher should tell them what to do, motivate them, coddle and coerce them into working.

The second respondent felt similarly. Please note that this part of her response does not refer to her experience at Riyadh University:

From working in this school I see that students are not really expected to do much in class. The teachers give them the answers on the board and the students then copy it into their workbook so that it is perfect for the parents/administrators....everyone. All learning is passive.

Based on the respondents’ feelings and my experience, Saudi students often wanted their teachers to tell them what to do. In fact, on several occasions students asked directly, “What do I need to do in order to get an A in your class?” The answer was always: come to class on time, do all your homework and do your best on all essays and exams. However, the students never seemed satisfied with this response. Clearly, they thought that the teacher held the secret to success in the class. I expected their motivation to come from inside them, whereas they expected me to motivate them.

The students’ expectation made them appear passive. However, one of the teachers polled also felt that her students were quite active in their attempts to negotiate the rules of the class:
They also expect that teachers be extra flexible and to negotiate with them. They want to negotiate homework, being in class late, assignment due-dates, etc. If you stick to rules they loathe this to an extreme degree.

Clearly, we American teachers thought that good students respect rules which are set and non-negotiable. However, the Saudi students seemed to think that most aspects of the classroom were open for discussion. This cultural conflict caused a lot of frustration for teachers and students.

**Wasta: A Feature of Saudi Relationships**

Not only did Saudi students try to negotiate rules with their teachers, but during conflict they used their personal connections to bring about their desired outcome. The feelings of two other respondents support this view. One colleague told of a student who continuously came to her office to ask for a grade to be changed. Another student threatened to complain to the RU president and even to King Abdullah himself when she had to repeat a class. The instructor saw this as a classic example of a Middle Eastern cultural practice called *wasta* in which people use personal ties or family connections to gain jobs, school admission, good grades and other favors. Wasta is loosely defined as clout, influence or “who you know.” Discussion of this term and its influence in Middle Eastern culture is mostly focused on the business world. People will get jobs based purely on who they know, regardless of their education or credentials. Wasta can also be used with such things as getting a passport renewed quickly (*The wonders of wasta.* 2005).

Based on the experiences of my colleagues, *wasta* is also used in an educational context. However, in this case *wasta* is not only used to gain favors, but to resolve conflict. So, although the above examples show Saudi students’ expectations of the teacher-student relationship, this instance of *wasta* also shows us that some students are accustomed to using their connections to bring about their desired outcome. This also seems to agree with the opinion of a respondent who thought that in a conflict, students would only go to the teacher’s superior if that teacher were not
open to negotiation. If the teacher would not give in to their demands, then they would try to apply their *wasta*.

**Contrasting Ways of Dealing with Conflict**

The way the students handled conflict contrasted sharply with mine. I was surprised when I learned that my students had gone to Lisa, RU’s student advocate, to complain about my class. My first thought was “Why didn’t they tell me?” As a general rule, whenever there is a conflict in the classroom, I would approach the involved student privately to discuss the problem and come to a mutually agreed upon solution. I would not seek outside mediation unless the student and I were unable to agree on a resolution or a course of action. Also, if the situation were very emotionally charged or volatile, I would allow some time for me and the student to calm down before discussing the conflict again.

At the time, I was very confused by my students’ behavior since it contrasted so sharply with my expectations. In a way, I was hurt because I interpreted their behavior as a lack of trust in our relationship. Perhaps they didn’t feel as comfortable with me as I thought. However, this conflict also has everything to do with culture, specifically with the difference between Arab and American communication styles. For example, it is widely understood that the United States of America practices a direct communication style.

Americans tend to speak in a very direct manner, striving to remove expressive overtones…Clarity and emotional objectivity are prized and seen as signs of competence and candor, while losing one’s composure is equivalent to losing one’s objectivity (Kelley, 2004).

In contrast, most Arab countries practice an indirect communication style, where saving face is extremely important. In other words, when attempting to save face, people avoid embarrassing or criticizing each other publicly. So, whereas in American culture emotional objectivity is prized,
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in Arab cultures saving face is crucial and “communication skills are measured by how cleverly one can disguise criticism.” (Kelley, 2004)

Contrasting our communication styles in this way helps shed light on the conflict in my classroom in a number of ways. First of all, it helps explain why I was so confused by my students’ behavior. As an American, I expected my students to approach me directly about their dissatisfaction with the class. Also, my students chose to express their dissatisfaction with an outsider instead of approaching me directly because they had learned an indirect communication style which urged them to avoid embarrassing me or criticizing me publicly. In fact, their communication style probably taught them not to allude to any criticism or dissatisfaction with me at all. This might also help explain why the students seemed happy when in reality they felt they were not learning anything in the class.

Influence of Students on the Administration of the School

The cultural practice of *wasta* and the indirect communication style help explain how the students reacted to the conflict we experienced. When the students chose to approach the administration, they were probably highly aware of the sway they held over them and would be very comfortable using it to their advantage. This kind of behavior would not be acceptable unless the university, and Saudi culture as a whole, encouraged it in some way.

There was an atmosphere of customer service at Riyadh University; administrators seemed to adhere strongly to the concept “the customer is always right.” This atmosphere encouraged students to be very vocal about their problems and concerns in order to find a suitable resolution. As a result, instead of being proactive with identifying struggling employees, the university failed to act unless a student or group of students voiced a concern. Clearly, the
dissatisfaction of the students was considered a very serious problem and cause for action. In order to explain this dynamic, one poll respondent wrote: “Riyadh University is a business whose job is to keep its customers happy. If they don’t keep students satisfied, then business won’t succeed.” The classroom should not be viewed as some kind of marketplace. At the same time, it is understandable why RU/SLG would have this attitude. They care deeply about educating their students, but they also want to make a profit and will therefore do whatever they can to satisfy students and their families.

At the same time, however, student-centered teaching was a very important educational philosophy at the school. Teachers were always encouraged to tailor assignment and activities very closely to students’ interests and needs. This is also a philosophy that is strongly supported by SIT. By itself, student-centered teaching does not cause much concern. At Riyadh University, however, student-centered teaching became a problem when it was not balanced with support for the teachers and their views. To be sure, a teacher must respect the educational philosophy of a school and the concerns of the students. At the same time, a school must respect the authority a teacher has over her students and classroom practices. At RU, the overwhelming impression was always that the administration was more concerned with satisfying the students than it was with making sure teachers felt in control of their classrooms.

**Conflicting Expectations: Teacher and Students**

How can my colleagues’ interpretations of Saudi students’ attitudes and behavior help shed light on the conflicting expectations of teachers and students? Clearly, my students and I seriously disagreed about the roles of students and teachers. I expected them to be more independent, active and self-motivated, while they were used to depending on teachers who played an active and central role in the classroom. They expected to have little control or
opportunities for independent work or self-sufficiency. Although I had clear responsibilities as a teacher, my role as a student clouded my vision and made me see myself passively; I was there to be helped, encouraged and guided down the path to becoming an effective teacher. The role I took did not work because the students and the administration felt that I, the teacher, was entirely responsible for the success of the class. I assumed that their desire to open up and share personal details meant that they liked me and were satisfied with the class. I also assumed that we had a rapport, whereas if that were true, I believe the students would have approached me about the conflict instead of voicing their concerns to an administrator.

**Educational Reform in Saudi Arabia: From Dependence to Independence**

In order to further explain this clash between my attitudes and expectations and those of my students, it is helpful to further examine the role I was expected to take as a faculty member at Riyadh University. In order to explain this, it is necessary to look briefly at how faculty members were prepared to enter the Saudi classroom, including some of the guidelines we were given. According to these guidelines, it was expected that faculty at RU represent a new educational approach advocated by the Saudi government through their educational reform initiative, otherwise known as *Tatweer* ("reform" in Arabic).

In Saudi Arabia, there is no separation between church and state and strict Islamic clerics have a large amount of control over every aspect of government, including education. For most of the 20th and 21st centuries, education in Saudi Arabia has been largely religiously based. However, the revelation that most of the 9/11 hijackers were Saudi prompted officials to examine whether or not the education system was teaching extremism and hatred of non-Muslims (Elyas, 2008). As recently as 2006, Islamic militants associated with Al-Qaeda launched attacks in Riyadh that killed many Saudis and Westerners. This led to King Abdullah’s
2006 announcement of an official initiative to reform education in Saudi Arabia which is meant to give students a more nuanced view of Islam and also to give them the necessary critical thinking skills to gain employment after graduation (McEvers, 2009). The underlying assumption is that students who are used to an education focused on religion and learning by rote will not be prepared to enter the workforce of the 21st century. This education reform is meant to encourage students to become more independent, active learners who are able to think for themselves instead of having answers hand fed to them.

Riyadh University is one of dozens of colleges and universities developed under Tatweer that depend largely on foreign faculty members to teach classes and to develop and evaluate curriculum. The implication of this and other practices is that a western-style education is at the heart of the Tatweer movement. A deeper implication is that the Saudi government believes that the best way to foster independence and initiative is to expose students to a Western style education. A 9-page document entitled “Guidelines for New Faculty at RU” is a perfect example of this attitude. The guidelines state that the university “supports the process of positive change that the Saudis have initiated in the Saudi educational system.” In order to do this, RU strongly encourages faculty members to “rapidly accommodate the needed adjustments in RU curriculum and to lead students gently but firmly toward the ownership of responsibility for their own learning.” (Emphasis mine) It is assumed that the concepts of ownership and responsibility for learning are foreign to most Saudi students. The faculty is expected not to model or even encourage these values, but to basically push students to adopt an attitude that is unfamiliar to them.

Based on this document, encouraging attitudes that were previously unknown to Saudi students is a very important aspect of being a faculty member at RU. However, education reform
and the need to expose students to a new kind of pedagogy are mentioned only in passing along with such topics as compensation, housing, medical insurance and vacations. Furthermore, this document is the only place education reform is mentioned. The topic did not factor largely into training and no further guidelines or strategies were ever given for how to introduce students to these concepts.

In hindsight, the conflict that occurred in my classroom could have been avoided if I’d had a better understanding of what was expected of me. In addition, as mentioned previously, if I had known more about the general differences between Saudi students and American students, I might have been more aware of the cultural biases that made communication and mutual understanding so difficult. Introducing students to a completely new education style is a very serious responsibility that requires careful attention and extensive discussion. Adding a cultural component to training for new RU faculty would help make sure that the misunderstanding that occurred in my classroom does not keep reoccurring.
Chapter 3: Personal and Professional Evolution

As we have seen, culture played a significant role in contributing to the conflict that occurred at Riyadh University. If I had been better prepared or if I had at least been more aware of the cultural differences between my students and me, perhaps the outcome of events would have been different. However, aside from culture, there are a number of other factors that contributed to my separation from RU. These are factors over which I did have some degree of control. Due to my evolution and maturation as a teacher and the fact that I now teach in a very different environment, these factors no longer have a negative effect on me or my teaching.

One of these factors was my lack of experience. When I first started teaching at RU, I had just ended a year-long teaching hiatus. Also, I had only had one semester in the MAT program at SIT. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Saudi Language Group curriculum did not use any textbooks and was therefore very open ended, requiring teachers to be extremely patient, flexible, independent and creative. So, along with having to live in a completely new culture, I also had to find my way in a very challenging teaching environment for which I was poorly prepared. I also was experiencing health and personal problems including depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. In other words, before and during my experience at RU, I had always been very doubtful of my abilities. Teaching was a constant struggle and I never felt satisfied with my performance. I knew I wanted to become better and to feel more confident, but I was not sure how to accomplish this.

Looking back, I see how this lack of confidence made my experience in Riyadh more difficult. I was at a stage in my life and career where I needed a lot of guidance, feedback and reassurance. Because of the nature of the working environment at RU, I was unable to get what I
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needed to be comfortable and successful. I also lacked the experience necessary to be prepared for the highly innovative teaching that the SLG curriculum required. Also, one semester at SIT was not enough for me to be prepared to teach at Riyadh University. In hindsight, I prematurely accepted a job as an ESL instructor; I really should have completed the entire MAT program first. Therefore, I was not ready, professionally or personally to be the kind of teacher that my students or Saudi Language Group expected me to be.

The second factor is my ability to ask for help and communicate openly with colleagues and administrators. At RU, I knew almost from the beginning that something was wrong. However, I took my position there for granted and thought I had plenty of time to improve. I should have been proactive by asking for help much earlier. In addition, there were various barriers to communication that I have already described; for example, the administration generally supported students more than teachers. There was also a lack of trust, which I discovered when my confidential expression of difficulty (“I feel like I don’t know what I’m doing.”) was seen as a sign of weakness and used as justification for my firing. However, in my new teaching context, lack of experience and lack of open, trusting communication with administrators no longer negatively affect my teaching.

After I left RU in June 2009 and returned to SIT to complete the summer semester, I felt very reassured and much more prepared to teach. So in January 2010 when I became an adjunct instructor at Liberty Community College in northern New Jersey, it was a fresh start. LCC’s ESL program is also preparatory, in that students have to pass six levels of writing, grammar, reading and speaking classes before they can start their major course of study. As a community college, it attracts a student body that is diverse in age and national origin. Students range in age from 18 to over 50 and come from all over the world, but mostly from Latin America and the Middle East.
The curriculum is very well-established and includes a textbook for each skill that is taught, which makes me feel comfortable and at ease. The textbooks give me support as I guide students towards the skills they need to acquire by the end of the semester and they make me more confident when I create my own activities and projects.

In addition to the use of textbooks, the pedagogical philosophy at LCC is also somewhat different from RU. It is not exactly student-centered, but it is still very focused on satisfying students and making sure they feel as if they’re learning and getting something out of the classes. Yet this desire to serve students never puts instructors at a disadvantage. Whenever I have had a conflict with a student, the administration has always listened to me and treated me with respect. I have always received advice about how to handle the conflict and felt that the administration supports me. At the same time, they are open, yet respectful, when pointing out areas where a teacher could improve her practices. For example, when being observed in a grammar class, I accidently included incorrect information during a lesson on articles. I was not reprimanded or belittled; rather the experienced faculty member who observed me gently pointed out the mistake and gave me suggestions on how to present the topic in the future. Because of this culture of respect, I am much more trusting of LCC’s administration, especially when discussing conflict with students or expressing an area of weakness.

The administration at LCC makes me feel comfortable and reassured, but my students do as well. I have received consistently positive comments on evaluations and students regularly thank me directly for the help I give them throughout the semester. This shows me that I have gained more experience and that I am having a positive impact on my students. Also, in this situation, it is difficult to doubt my abilities, as I have concrete evidence that I am doing a good
job. However, there are still areas where I could improve. For example, I would like for my
teaching to be more creative and for my classes to be more exciting and stimulating.

Until recently, I had always thought my experience at Riyadh University was very
negative. I didn’t think that there was anything positive to gain from it. However, as I continue to
teach at LCC, I see the ways in which my experience in Riyadh has helped me become more
effective when relating to students and handling cultural conflicts. For example, northern New
Jersey has immigrants from all over the Middle East. At Liberty Community College, however,
most of the Middle Eastern students come from Egypt. In a way, they remind me a lot of the
Saudi students I encountered. They talk a lot in Arabic and it seems difficult for them to stay
quiet during class. Also, they stick together so much that they need lots of encouragement to
interact with any non-Egyptian students. In the past, this kind of behavior would have frustrated
me very much, and to an extent it still does. However, because of my experience in Riyadh, I feel
that I understand the students’ behavior in a special way. I realize that they are not trying to be
difficult or disrespectful; they are just being themselves. So when I think of ways to prevent this
behavior from becoming disruptive, I am much more sensitive to the students’ needs and
motivations.

In my classes at LCC, I feel much more capable and prepared, but when I was teaching at
RU, very often I just didn’t know what to do; I felt lost. As a result, little was accomplished in
my classes because they were directionless and unfocused. Of course, this was partially because
of inexperience, but it also had to do with how I saw myself. I wanted to do a good job so badly,
but because of my low self-esteem, I felt this was impossible. Instead I did nothing. I was so
concerned with my own feelings and reactions to this new experience that I forgot the main
objective of teaching which is to serve the students. So in the future I will spend less time
worrying about myself and my performance and more time thinking about the best way to help students achieve their goals.

When I first embarked on the journey to analyze my experiences in Riyadh, I had three main objectives: I wanted to figure out what had happened, why it had happened and how I could prevent the same problem from reoccurring. Now that my exploration of this experience is coming to a close, I feel confident that I have addressed the first two objectives and that I no longer need to reflect on them. Over the past three years, I have spent so much time contemplating these traumatic events and the painful realizations that have arisen. Finally, I can put all of this away and no longer let it make me doubt my capabilities as a teacher.

However, the third objective remains and there are several practices I will adopt to prevent a similar problem from occurring in the future. For example, I will continue to gain experience and pursue professional development activities. I will strive for open communication and collaboration with colleagues and administrators and I will ask for help when problems arise. In addition, I will use the newfound confidence in my abilities to take the focus off my performance and put it back on the students. Finally, I will be more aware of looking at my students through a filter of cultural biases and the potential difficulties this can cause. Over the course of reflecting on these events and writing this paper, I have grown as a human being and as a professional. I am a work in progress and there is a lot that I would like to accomplish in the future. However, I am sure that the newer, brighter vision I have adopted will only continue to become more vivid and fully realized.
References


