

Adjustment of Arab Students to University Life in the United States

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The Arab countries continue to send a large number of students to study in U.S. universities every year. It is, therefore, important for university administrators and faculty to be familiar with salient characteristics of Arab culture so that they can facilitate the adjustment of Arab students to life in the United States of America.

The study described below was undertaken to determine how Arab students in one American university viewed their experience of adaptation.

Subjects

The subjects were 29 Arab students enrolled in the English for International Students Program at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The distribution according to country and sex is presented in Table I. These subjects were students in the author's EFL classes at the time of the study. They provided information about their personal experiences living and studying in the United States which should prove useful to EFL

instructors and other university personnel who come into contact with students from Arab countries.

Data Collection

Two means were used to collect the data for the study, a questionnaire and student dialogue journal entries.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire with 12 questions was prepared by the author and administered to the subjects. Most of the students responded to the questionnaire orally and this process took an average of two hours per student. Some students were pressed for time and preferred to complete the questionnaire on their own in writing.

Dialogue Journal Entries

The author analyzed the dialogue journals of the Arab students in her classes, looking in particular for references relevant to the questions posed by the study.

Table I. Characteristics of Subjects in Study

COUNTRY	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Saudi Arabia	10	3	13
Kuwait	6	2	8
Egypt	3	1	4
Iraq	3	1	4
TOTAL	22	7	29

Dialogue journal writing is a reading/writing exchange between two individuals. The students in the author's classes wrote in their journals for fifteen minutes at the beginning of each class period. The author then collected the journals and responded to them outside of class.

This journal writing was part of the course work; the author did not institute it specifically for the study. The students were free to write on any topic they chose, and there was no attempt by the author to direct their writing in any way.

Results

The responses to the questionnaire questions are given below. When relevant, comments from the dialogue journals are added. (While spelling errors have been corrected, no other changes have been made in reporting the student writing.)

Question #1: Did anything shock or surprise you when you first arrived in the United States?

Many of the students responded in the negative because they were already familiar with U.S. culture through movies and television programs shown in their own countries. Several students had also taken trips to Europe which they felt prepared them for the Western way of life.

Some students, however, were surprised or shocked by particular aspects of U.S. life. Aspects that impressed them were the wide use of computers, the variety of ethnic groups, the long bridges, and the large size of some U.S. cities. Features that shocked them were the amount of crime, the leniency shown toward criminals, the density of traffic, the perceived

discrimination against Blacks, the materialism, and the attempts to 'rip off' foreigners.

Question #2: Have you had any problems adjusting to life in the United States?

The students listed several problems they had encountered. Loneliness was frequently mentioned. Most were living alone for the first time in their lives and they found it difficult to be independent. They missed their families and their friends. Furthermore, they experienced problems in associating with Americans, particularly because of insufficient English language skills.

In regard to language, one student wrote the following entry in his dialogue journal:

When I reached this country I was very happy but the language was very difficult for us. So I became unhappy. Because I went to the doctor I couldn't explain to him how I felt.

This same student mentioned another source of unhappiness, his tremendous frustration in buying a car.

When I bought a car I couldn't understand the system of this country. So I felt I wanted to go back to my country again. But I can't because our government ordered us to stay here for nine months. So I will try to understand everything about this country.

Trying to adjust to American food was a common problem. In particular, there were objections to frozen food and junk food.

The difficulty of finding an apartment was frequently cited. One student mentioned that not only was it difficult to find an apartment but once one was found the contract was very complicated and therefore confusing. He was very surprised at the need for a two-month deposit and other regulations. He was, furthermore, disturbed that a penalty was imposed if the rent was late as such a practice is forbidden in his religion.

How to cope with winter weather was another serious concern of many students. One Saudi wrote the following entry in his journal:

Mrs. Meloni, I want your advice please. We know that after a month from now the weather will be colder and the snow will fall down. That thing is very strange for me. So I want to know what I can do. I think I can't drive my car when the snow falls down. How can I come to GW? I think maybe I will stay home most of the time.

One of the Saudi women remarked that her greatest problem was adjusting to a classroom with male and female students together. (In her own country there is separation at all levels of education.) She feared men and found it upsetting to be in the same class with them.

Question #3: What differences have you found between the people in your country and the American people?

The answers to this question were not particularly complimentary to Americans.

The three Iraqi males felt that their people were more "humanitarian." When asked to explain further, they said that in Iraq there were better "human relations" among people. Iraqis were more helpful with friends and strangers than Americans were.

The Saudis emphasized differences in the concept of family between Saudi Arabia and the United States. One Saudi male said that he found family relations in the United States "almost zero." Another noted that Saudi children had a great deal more respect for their parents. Children of any age liked to be with their parents because "parents always have something to teach their children."

The Saudis also commented on differences in the concept of friendship. One remarked that money and materialism seemed more important than friendship to Americans. Another Saudi said, "An American would kill a friend to get back a penny owed him."

The Egyptians also referred to the difference in family and friendship ties. One commented that the American family was "very loose," while it was "very tight in Egypt."

The Egyptian woman remarked that in the United States people did not know their neighbors. She herself lived in an eight-story apartment building in Cairo and she knew not only everyone on her floor and throughout the building but also her neighbors in the buildings across the street.

Question #4. What differences are there in the way people dress in

your country and in the United States?

The Saudis and the Kuwaitis said that people in their countries generally wore their traditional dress. Women in Kuwait, however, did not wear the veil, while Saudi women did.

One of the Saudi women said that she enjoyed the opportunity to be able to go outside without the veil. The other Saudi woman, on the other hand, said that she felt very uncomfortable without the veil. She chose not to wear it, however, in order to avoid the stares of Americans. (In Saudi Arabia women cover their faces completely.)

The Iraqis and Egyptian students affirmed that almost all of the people in their countries wore Westernized clothing. Exceptions mentioned were the Kurds and women in some villages in Iraq and some village women in Egypt.

Question #5. What differences are there in the relationship between men and women in the two countries?

Men and women are largely separated in all four countries. In Saudi Arabia there is complete segregation. In Kuwait men and women may attend classes at the university together and work in the same place; there are, however, no social relationships between men and women who are not in the same family.

In Egypt, men and women are very conservative in their relationships with each other. At the university there is mixing on campus, but off campus there is absolutely no mixing. This situation

is, however, slowly beginning to change.

A Kuwaiti student stated that education has played an important role in changing the traditional way of determining marriage partners. While in the past it was exclusively the decision of the parents, today in most cases it is the young people who make the decision. The whole matter, of course, must still be handled by the young people's families. He explained the situation in the following way in his journal:

In the past and maybe some nowadays all marriages were arranged ones but the new generation is more liberal and most of today's marriages are done after mutual agreement between the man and his woman. Today everybody is educated and the girls have a way in agreeing to the marriage and sometimes in the kind of conditions. Myself, I had to ask her if she wanted to get married and she could agree or reject the proposal. Our custom is to have intermarriage between the same family, but today things are changing and marriage is happening between all the big families.

In the following entry a young woman from Saudi Arabia explained how she met her husband.

My husband Aziz was working with my uncle in the same company. Aziz asked my uncle about my father and if he had a daughter or not. My uncle said that he had two, one the same age as Aziz but me smaller than him by about seven years. Then he asked about me. What am I studying? How is my mother? Where am I studying? How old am I? Many questions about me.

And my father asked about him. Everybody knows him. After that I told my father I wanted to see him and he wanted to see me, too. He came to my father's house and he stayed with my father and my uncle. About me--I gave them coffee and tea. That's all. I was very beautiful that day. I didn't talk with him or sit. I just served the drinks. After one week he came with his father and brother Saud to ask the engagement from my father.

A man from Saudi Arabia recounted how he chose his wife.

My wife is my friend's sister and her family is a neighbor of my family. I know or see my wife when she was a child but when she became 14 years old her family covered her face and then I didn't see her again. When I thought to marry I talked with my mother about her and my mother agreed. Then we went to her family. Afterwards her family agreed also and we completed the marriage. But in the marriage the girl must agree or accept the man who wants to marry her. If the girl doesn't agree, the marriage is never completed.

A man from Iraq felt very upset that in his country women are still sometimes forced to marry against their will.

Don't you know that in Iraq or in other Middle East countries the woman still can't choose their fiancé whom will be their husband? Because their fathers still force them to marry who they want, not what the girls want. One day when I was in Iraq I was visiting my mother in the hospital and I saw a nice girl sleeping

next to my mother. My mother told me that girl had drunk some poisoned liquid because her father forced her to marry a guy so that she was trying to commit suicide.

One of the Egyptian males noted that American women were much freer and their husbands didn't seem to care about them very much. A Kuwaiti male also remarked that the woman in Kuwait was more respected by her husband than the American woman was.

Question #6. What is the role of women in your country?

Most Saudis agreed that the woman's only role should be that of wife and mother.

One of them said that in his country the woman was "a holy person."

We serve everything outside the house and she gives us everything inside the house. She can't drive because we love her and we don't like her to have any problems. We give her all the love and all the help to live very happy.

In Kuwait women can work wherever they wish with one exception: they cannot be judges. The Kuwaiti women also cannot vote in the country's elections.

In Egypt a woman is able to hold any job she wants, depending on her education and her social class.

The role of Iraqi women is very important for the progress of the country, although their role in society is not as extensive as that of American women. One of the Iraqi males stressed the

importance of women in his country in the following journal entry:

In Iraq during the last ten years the government has created a lot of opportunities for the woman to study, work, join the army, and ask the man for divorce if she wants that. Anyway, my country needs all the efforts from the man and woman to develop Iraq.

That is why the woman in Iraq has a different role from the woman in the other Arab countries. Our government believes that the development of the country depends on the woman as it depends on the man. That is a principle, not a temporary policy.

Question #7. Has it been difficult for you to practice your religion in a non-Muslim country?

None of the Iraqis cited problems. The Iraqi woman said that she experienced no problems because "Islam is a way of life and I can follow it wherever I am." The Kuwaitis also said that they had no problems.

One of the Saudis said that Islam was an "easy, soft religion." One didn't need to do the difficult parts of it. If one drank alcohol, he said, it was only a minor infraction. Not wearing the veil was also a "minor mistake."

Another Saudi remarked that the greatest problem for him was observing Ramadan, the month in which Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset.

In the United States the atmosphere is wrong. You see and feel what you are not supposed to and this could ruin everything. The food preparation is

difficult. Instead of breaking the fast after sundown with dates as is done in Saudi Arabia, one has to use French fries. It just isn't the same!

Another problem was the conflict between Friday afternoon classes and the obligation to attend prayers at the mosque at the same time.

The students who were most concerned about religious matters were the Egyptians. They mentioned the impossibility of praying five times a day which is one of the five basic obligations for Muslims. One mentioned that in Cairo, for example, there were announcements to let people know when it was time to pray. In the United States, of course, there were no such reminders.

The Egyptian woman said that since it was difficult for her to pray five separate times, she recited all the prayers together at the end of the day. She expressed dissatisfaction with this solution but had no other. She also mentioned the difficulty of fasting during Ramadan when no one else was in the same situation.

Question #8a. What do you especially like about the United States?

Several students mentioned the legal system and the respect for the law that they found in the United States. (These responses seem to contradict the responses given to the first question.) They also praised the organized nature of the society, the modern technology, the availability of all products, and the ability of the people to use time productively. One student was favorably impressed with the concern for the handicapped and senior citizens.

Question #8b. What don't you like about the United States?

They didn't like the crime, the drugs, the lack of family relations, the excessive freedom of women, the American dislike of foreigners, the food, and the weather (in particular, the snow).

Question #9a: What do you especially like about your own country?

Everyone without exception said that they liked the social system and the family life in their countries. The Egyptians were proud of their educational system which was considered the most advanced in the Arab world and the Iraqis mentioned their university educational system which was free to everyone.

Question #9b. What would you like to change in your country?

The Saudis would like to improve their educational system. The Kuwaitis would like their people to have more respect for the law. The Egyptians would like their country to be cleaner and better organized. The Iraqis would only like to change the weather in their country.

Question #10. Compare university classes in your country and the United States. What are the major differences?

In all four countries the class size is much larger than in the United States.

For the Saudis the major difference was the segregation of the sexes in their schools. One Saudi also mentioned that American students seemed more childish

than Saudi students of the same age.

The Egyptians pointed out that in all Egyptian universities there was one continuous academic year rather than semesters or quarters. Students were required to take seven courses each year. All courses were required with no opportunity for students to choose electives.

Question #11. What differences do you see in the teacher-student relationship between the two countries?

All of the students noted that the relationship was more formal and more respectful in their own countries. Teachers were generally stricter and more authoritarian and not as accessible outside of class. One Kuwaiti pointed out that classes were very quiet in his country; only the teacher spoke.

Many were shocked at the behavior of Americans in class. Frequently mentioned was the habit of eating and drinking during class. Also a few students mentioned the poor posture of American students, particularly the way in which many stretched out their legs. One student commented on the fact that American students sometimes interrupted their teachers.

Question #12. What advice would you give to an Arab friend coming to study in the United States?

One of the Saudi women said that she would say, "Don't come! It's difficult for a girl because she'll be homesick."

Some would encourage their friends to make friends with Americans and perhaps other foreign students but would warn them that they would probably be lonely and homesick. The Iraqi woman would advise any Arab friends not to mix with other Arabs.

The most forceful advice came from one of the Egyptians:

Don't lock yourself up in a shell saying you're an Arab and that you'll be living the Arabic way here and will not communicate with Americans. This is the biggest mistake.

Several students mentioned that it would be advisable to learn English well before coming. Language was a major concern.

Some would advise their friends to be prepared to work hard and would warn them to be as well organized as possible in order not to waste time. "Life is very fast in the United States," wrote one student.

One student said that he would tell his friend to treat his teachers as friends and explain any troubles he faced to them.

Question #13. What advice would you give to American teachers so that they could make the Arab students in their classes feel more comfortable?

Several students mentioned that American professors should take into account the language problems of foreign students. A Saudi student said specifically that professors should speak more slowly and explain any difficult vocabulary

items. Another Saudi suggested that the professors help them as much as possible. A Kuwaiti thought that weekly individual meetings outside of class would be very useful in helping foreigners with their academic and personal problems.

It was stressed that foreign students had certain problems that American students did not have. One Iraqi said, "Give them more emotion."

A frequent complaint was that professors knew nothing about Arab culture. It would be flattering, the students said, if professors learned a few Arabic words, the names of some cities, and had some general cultural information. It seems that teachers of English as a foreign language, for example, often used Spanish examples in class but never Arabic ones.

A few students felt that professors did not trust Arab students. The Iraqi woman said, "Be more trusting. Let the students feel more comfortable."

Question #14. Do you think that you will have any difficulty in readjusting to your own culture when you finish your studies here and go back home?

Most of the students felt that they would have no problems.

The Iraqi woman said she enjoyed the freedom to socialize in the United States. In Iraq one must be very guarded in social relationships and she considered this a negative aspect of her society.

The Egyptian woman said that she anticipated difficulty in readjusting to the heavy traffic and crowded buses in Cairo.

She would readjust quickly to the noise, however, because "the silence in the United States drives me crazy!"

One Saudi was concerned that he would have severe readjustment problems because he preferred the American life style. He was, therefore, seriously considering staying in the U.S. permanently.

Another Saudi, however, said the following in response to this question:

I don't think so because some of the changes I went through are temporary and they will disappear the minute I go back.

You may say I had some difficulties back home in understanding some of the restrictions in my culture but, when I came here, I got the chance to compare and see or wonder if we didn't have those kinds of restrictions wouldn't our life be like here? I came out to the conclusion that there is a reason for everything and I may like the life in the U.S. but I wouldn't like it to be like that in my country. Socially, I always think that we live in glory compared to here and only who lived in there could compare.

Conclusion

The one point that seemed to stand out clearly in the comments made by the students was the preoccupation with human relations. Family and friends were extremely important to these students. The lack of close relationships was very distressing to them.

Faculty and administrators should do all they can to bring these students into contact with the American community while not discouraging their relations with other Arabs. By making special efforts to learn more about the Arab students in order to facilitate their adjustment and to make their lives more pleasant, U.S. universities will enrich the lives not only of the foreign students but also of the American students as well.

About the Author

Christine Meloni is an associate professor of EFL in the English for International Students Program at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. At GWU's commencement ceremonies in May 1989, she received the Columbian College Award for Excellence in Teaching.