

# “We don’t teach English, we teach *in* English”: teaching non-native English speaking university students

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## Introduction

The challenge of teaching students whose native language is not English is likely familiar to many Western teaching academics, who may regularly work in their own countries with a significant element of international students. Indeed, according to Storch & Hill (2008), in some Australian faculties almost half of the students are non-native English speakers (non-NES). Both the present authors had taught non-NES students in Australia and in the UAE. While teaching in English as the language of instruction to non-NES students is not a new phenomenon in many universities throughout the world, pedagogy to promote successful learning outcomes for such students is a relatively recent development.

The modern characterization of the ‘international student’ is more complex than Biggs’ (1999) definition of “students who have gone to another country in order to enrol full-time in a university course”, (p. 230). It may be more appropriate (although still not sufficient) to define this group by the challenges they face, as noted by Arkoudis (2006):

- Learning and living in a different culture
- Learning in a foreign university context
- Learning while developing English language proficiency, and
- Learning the academic disciplinary discourse.

*Internationalization* was originally defined by Knight (1994) as the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of an educational institution. This definition was subsequently updated and extended to reflect the changing nature of the issue:

Internationalization at the national, sector or institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education (Knight, 2003, p2).

The issue of effectively teaching non-NES students remains a concern for faculty throughout the world. To give one anecdotal example, within our reflective practice examining this issue we noted a brief but poignant conversation in which we took part at an international conference. Two academics teaching Science in an Australian University related their experience with eight Saudi students studying with them, because four of the males were at risk of failing. They lamented that although the student’s language was acceptable and they had met the entry requirements of the correct IELTS, and indeed could carry on a conversation in English, they were not doing well in the subjects. Their comment was:

They do things differently. I don't really understand why, I just know that they are different. My Indian students don't seem to show any difficulties: they seem to be on the same wave length as us. (Australian Science professor, 2009).

Our concern about quality teaching in this context, which had begun in Australia, led us to propose the following research question: "How can we improve teaching effectiveness for local non-NES university students in the UAE?" However, these remarks further prompted the question of whether there might be a certain Arab way of learning that differed from the way in which other students learn. Thus, our research had begun in earnest.

This research has been collaboratively undertaken by a full time Business faculty member teaching Management Information Systems (MIS) at a national university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and by an educational specialist currently teaching final year courses in a Bachelor of Education degree also in the UAE. It was partially funded by a summer research grant from the Faculty of Business & Economics of UAE University, and was implicitly focused on local Arab students, setting out to investigate the challenges confronting stakeholders (learners and teachers) in an Arab context. The challenge of teaching non-NES had first become apparent in both authors' previous teaching roles in Australia, where there was often a majority of international over local students. At the turn of this century, the majority of international students in both authors' respective Australian universities were from Asian countries, mainly Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia; but more recently there had been a noticeable shift to Middle Eastern (ME) students from Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and Iran.

At the time when the authors were teaching in Australia (1990-2008), no significant moves were apparent in catering to any special ME cultural diversity. For example, Muslim students needed to adapt to a lack of consideration for prayer times (in particular the more time constrained *Maghrib* sunset prayers), and no consideration was normally given to Muslim students during Ramadan when *iftar*<sup>1</sup> fell in the middle of a class. It was apparent to us that ME students had different needs, not only from local Australian students, but also from other international students.

Although we were mindful of these cultural differences, our initial research began in the specific area of teaching in English to non-NES students, as we originally believed that *language* was the key variable offering the greatest potential for understanding how to better teach these students and enhance their learning outcomes. It was believed that the dominant issue in teaching UAE students was in their level of understanding English, leading us to place an emphasis on developing strategies that would directly address that issue. However, as the research progressed, additional observations, further reflections and changes in practice indicated that the English 'deficiency', although still of concern, was not the only issue that needed to be addressed in effective teaching of our particular students: other issues relating to non-NES students were emerging. This paper provides a brief context to explain our interest in this research topic, followed by a review of literature, presented within three iterations of an action research methodology. The paper concludes with a summary that reflects on the proposed model as a way forward for instructors to better understand cultural implications when teaching specific ethnic groups.

## Local background

From the numerous administrative responsibilities as an academic and teacher in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which required us to become familiar with students names and locations, and from responses to a short written questionnaire, we were able to confirm that students at our institutions are predominantly local, while both the majority of faculty and the language of instruction which is English, are foreign to them. In this situation local students must still adjust to the same sorts of issues referred

to above by Arkoudis (2006), so even if they have never left their own country they will find themselves in a similar position to that of the international student.

There are obvious pedagogical challenges in teaching any student whose native language (L1) is not the language of instruction. These difficulties are further exacerbated when delivery takes place in locations where the principle language of the country is not the language of instruction, resulting in situations where contact with the teaching academic may be one of the few occasions where students communicate in the language of instruction. For the majority of non-Arabic courses, the language of instruction in most UAE universities is English, yet although English is widely spoken, the official (and default) language of the region remains Arabic. This situation presents different issues than situations where English is the primary language of the local society (e.g. contexts of English as a Second/Other Language (ESOL) or English as an Additional Language (EAL)), and has more similarities with EFL (English as a Foreign Language).

Biggs (1999) claims that many university teachers have reported difficulties in teaching international students because of issues related to deficient language skills together with learning related problems that are seen as 'cultural' in origin. He goes on to suggest that an immediate reaction for some teachers is simply to take a 'blame-the-student' attitude. Teachers who have been accustomed to teaching mainly NES students in Western universities might easily perceive non-NES students, such as the Gulf students in this research, as being either 'lazy' or 'not at a high enough intellectual standard for university life', simply because of the difficulties they face with the language of instruction. However both of the present authors, who now teach at different institutions in the UAE, agree that, looking beyond the English, the abilities of Gulf students are generally intellectually comparable with Western students they have taught over a period of some decades. One author observed that some UAE students in response to divergent or creative problem solving tasks presented to them appeared highly talented and capable of interpreting complex concepts (cf. Russell, 2004). His observations concurred with those made in the conference conversation reported earlier: that these students appear to interpret, analyze and eventually understand concepts differently and in what may well be a unique manner. Attempting to identify just how these students manage to solve such advanced concepts might, it was thought, indicate what teaching styles and strategies could be more effective for other Arab students. Through conversations and interviews about teaching and learning with many groups of students we came to understand that although local UAE students face many of the same issues confronting international students throughout the world, they rarely have access to the benefits of many of the internationalization strategies that would be available to them if they were studying in another country.

In practical terms, the research investigates why teaching Arab students may require a distinct set of pedagogical perspectives to better guide their learning. We postulated that the findings might provide valuable insights to the teaching of other ethnic groups of students.

The next section explains the action research methodology of the study, as well as preliminary investigation using focus groups; a model based on our research is also presented to orient the reader. The rest of the paper presents three separate iterations of action research, with associated teaching practices, reflections and observations. Each subsequent iteration evolves from the previous one, and each is summarized in a table.

## Research methodology and preliminary results

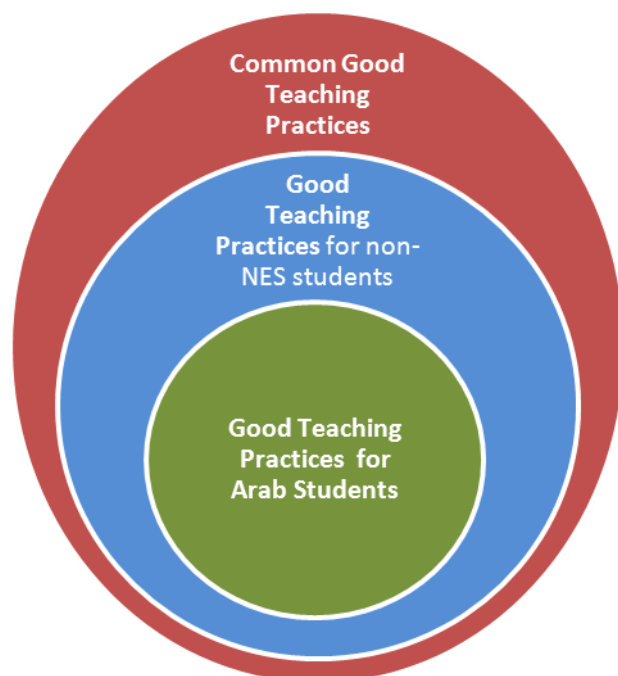
### *Action research methodology*

Action research is described by Dick (1999) as a process by which change and understanding can be pursued at the same time. It is cyclic in nature, with reflection used to review previous actions and to plan the next step. It is a research methodology that provides a way to determine more clearly not only “what is wrong” but also to identify “what is right” (Stringer et al., 2008, p. 123). Action research might therefore be summarized as the most appropriate methodology when practitioner researchers, seeking continual improvement through a better understanding of their environment, engage in ongoing cycles of data collection, analysis, actioning and evaluation of the actions taken. The decision to adopt an action research methodology allowed the researchers to observe and reflect on the actions of each intervention before analyzing the benefits and outcomes and moving to the next iteration. The original working title of the research was *We don't teach English: we teach in English*, and even though our primary focus was still based around how best to teach subject matter content we concentrated on the issues relating to *language*. Iteration 1 could therefore be described as the ‘language’ stage.

Iteration 2 moved the focus from language to *content and context*, and could be summarized as the ‘review of good teaching practices’ stage. This stage was to place more emphasis on the role of instructor practices, with the students themselves merely providing feedback on these practices. The analysis of notes combined with reflection on practice as well as the literature revealed ten main themes. As this iteration unfolded, our concern about the effect of culture on learning was heightened. This set the scene for the third iteration. However, before beginning this iteration a new literature review began, which focused specifically on culture and its relationship to learning. The focus of iteration 3 was on *culture* and its relationship to both learning and teaching. From this third iteration six themes emerged.

In sum, the unfolding of each iteration was recorded in reflections that prompted new discussions, and in turn, assisted in planning the following iterations. Each iteration and its related literature review is presented in the following sections. At this juncture the theoretical model which had been developing was confirmed as an embedded model. The model described the interrelationship of the three foci from the various iterations; it emerged part-way through the many interrogations of the data and subsequently served as a guide to structure the iterations and the literature review. The presentation of the model here serves as an advance organizer to guide the sequencing of the iterations and their relationship to the development of the model.

- I. Common good teaching practices (Iteration 2)
- II. Non-native speaking good teaching practices (Iteration 1)
- III. Good teaching practices for Arab students (Iteration 3)



**Figure 1: Embedded three-component model for effective teaching.**

The three embedded components in Figure 1 evolved from all interviews as well as from introducing exploratory techniques into existing pedagogies and analyzing the impacts. Note that Figure 1 reflects the relative scope of the concepts involved, rather than the chronological sequence of the three iterations of research.

### ***Participants***

Several groups of participants were involved in the study. One of the researchers was a participant observer: not only did he plan the pedagogy and content, he taught 16 undergraduate classes at one UAE university over five semesters from 2008 - 2010, and was therefore deeply involved in actioning his decisions directed towards how to better teach non-NES students. Table 1 summarizes this context and student participants (NB: UAE culture requires males and females to be taught separately).

**Table 1: UAE local student participants.**

<b>Semester</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Student numbers</b>
Fall semester 2008	Project Management	10 (Male), 25 (Female) =35
	E-Business	6 (Male), 9 (Female) = 15
Spring semester 2009	Enterprise Information Systems	3 (Male), 22 (Female) = 25
Fall Semester 2009	Project Management	17 (Male), 47 (Female) =64
Spring semester 2010	Enterprise Information Systems	10 (Male), 39(Female) =49

	E-Business	18 (Male), 15 (Female) = 33
Fall semester 2010	Project Management	8 (Male), 11 (Female) =17
	Enterprise Information Systems	7 (Male), 13 (Female) =20

As a preliminary step in research, we gathered and drew upon data from focus groups involving both local UAE students and ME students in Australia. Within this list, those taught in the fall of 2008 were participants in focus group interviews about ways they learnt discipline content. In addition, a group of 17 ME students studying English at a Queensland University for one semester (2009) participated in a semi-structured group discussion on ways they learn and the teaching approaches they particularly liked. Three individual post-graduate students studying at another Queensland University, and who had been studying at Master's level overseas, were interviewed about their experiences in studying in a language, which was not their native language.

Reflections from teaching ME students in previous undergraduate classes in Australian universities were also brought to bear on the issue we were investigating. More generally, we socialized with Arab academics at conferences from 2009-2011 to position ourselves in conversations about our issue whenever it arose.

### ***Data collection procedures and data analysis***

Although the action research focused on several cohorts of students at one UAE university, other data gathering methods were used simultaneously to illuminate the issues and to obtain any information that impacted on how better to teach non-NES students or that indicated particular learning characteristics of ME students.

The semi-structured discussion with the 20 students studying in Australia was recorded in field notes. Three main questions guided the discussions:

1. In your current studies here in Australia, how best do you learn English?
2. Is the approach to learning you are currently using different to the approach to learning back in your home country?
3. If you could make recommendations to your teacher about how they might teach you, what would these be?

The focus group of local students in the UAE responded to two main questions:

1. What strategies do you use to learn discipline [Information Systems related] content?
2. What is important and valued by you in the learning in a university context?

This same group of students also completed a short questionnaire requesting their ethnic background, level of English, year of study and opinions on three open ended questions about teaching and learning:

1. What teaching techniques have you found useful in courses?
2. How often were these techniques used in courses?
3. What techniques did you use to learn English?

The main data was collected from teaching over five semesters. Field notes were maintained from the teaching approaches that were introduced and formed the basis of many discussions and reflections

between the authors, which in turn prompted a review of the literature. The data was analyzed in three iterations and each is presented below. In each iteration a table is presented to document the strategy or topic of teaching that was introduced, the actions of the instructor and the reflections that were of significance.

### ***Findings from the interviews and questionnaire***

It was found from the interview of 17 ME students studying in Australia that they were deeply concerned with the language itself. They emphasized the importance of vocabulary and the grammatical correctness of their responses both in speaking and writing. They were clearly in some state of anxiety, as indicated by the references to the pace of learning and expectations of them and that these were not what they were accustomed to. They emphasized how the feedback from teachers was not only important but essential, as without it they were not able to ascertain if they were achieving. When asked about the content of what they were learning and its value and importance to their success, almost all students answered that being grammatically correct was more important as that was what got them marks, and these marks indicated that they had achieved. This same group recommended that teachers provide extensive feedback on the 'correctness' of their responses. They liked PowerPoint presentations that contained much of the information presented, in a lesson and advised all teachers to adopt this technique.

The three post-graduate students, being more independent learners with previous experience studying in English in English speaking environments, contrasted their approach now with learning in the past. Although they said that language was definitely an issue and was continually the focus of much of the markers attention, they themselves were more motivated to understand the content, and did so by reading extensively in English and using learned reading techniques, the internet and interaction with NES postgraduate peers, as well as large amounts of time in translating words into their native language. One student highlighted the importance of the instructor speaking slowly, although this may have been inferred by others when students mentioned using easy words and terminology. Although only one student mentioned the pace of speaking we interpreted that when other students suggested using easy words they too may have also inferred that a teacher use a slower pace. These three students valued the freedom related to the time they had to pursue learning in their way, such as watching the news, and talking with others, believing in social collaboration. Two students said that they were more conscious of how other research was written and they tried to emulate the structure such as headings and sentences, but at the same time they valued feedback on their knowledge, ideas and the correctness of their language in their writing. One student said he did not perceive English as a foreign language but merely the language of learning content. He learned vocabulary by watching TV and movies, and continues to improve by watching news in English, selected because of the style and content and the different opinions presented. This same student shared his feelings about returning to Saudi Arabia and fitting into a work environment. With his major in Project Management he said he was aware he should insist on the process of working to time frames, but felt that he would not be doing so as this was not a priority in his culture. They had valued the opportunity to study in an English speaking country and now with their level of English so much more advanced appreciated being told of errors before work was formally assessed. They indicated that presenting work at this higher level required grammatical accuracy, and they were keen and very motivated to present their knowledge to an acceptable standard. However, they did not let this undermine nor detract from the knowledge generation of their work. They contrasted their current learning style with the past, which for them was about exams. One student said that students get used to this process and 'learn to play by whatever rules you learn' (student Mohammed).

Interviews with the local students, on the other hand, revealed their concern to be grammatically correct even to the extent of disregarding the learning of content at a deep level. They strove to be grammatically correct as this is what they learned earned them good or poor marks in their assessment tasks. They focused on ensuring they knew word meanings and could use them in their assessments in the belief this was foundational to their progress in any one course. They too, like the post-graduate students, spent a great deal of time translating individual words. They would also 'copy' phrases and sentences from texts and other written resources as they knew these to be grammatically correct and content relevant. They desired some way of being able to listen to the 'lecture' several times or have a recording of it so that they might use the information to assist them in responding to assessment tasks. They further confirmed that being grammatically correct and using correct vocabulary was something they had learned from receiving marks on all other assessments. In other words, their focus on what it means to achieve was at odds with the teaching practices in the courses taught by the author and researcher of this paper, who focused on understanding content first as the means to learning. The student's focus was also at odds with the stated objectives of the course and other courses in their program. In other words, course objectives stated the *content* to be learned and assessed, but the marking and assessment criteria also focused on grammar.

The questionnaire focusing on how the local students learn produced the following information:

1. Most students were in their 4th year of study (two students were in 3rd year).
2. Students rated their level of English mostly at 4 (ranking was 1-5 with 5 as the highest).
3. Students listed several useful teaching techniques:
  - use of easy English terms;
  - use of basic English language;
  - providing clear examples linked to the subject;
  - providing related practice after the lecture and with discussion;
  - keep asking students if they understand or not;
  - asking students questions so they are forced to participate;
  - repeating information again and again;
  - letting students give presentations;
  - providing a summary before the lecture or class;
  - providing questions, debating these and then giving the 'real' answers to the questions.
4. Students made general statements about the frequency of techniques, in general referring to infrequent use (eg. "rarely", "twice", "not so much").
5. Students listed keys to learning English as:
  - reading;
  - forming relationships with friends whose first language is English;
  - listening to English music;
  - using computers in English;
  - being taught English in school;
  - watching documentary programs;

- speaking, “reading vocabularies” (sic – understood to be key or focus words/terminology related to the topic)
- being in a good encouraging environment for speaking and studying in English;
- working on research projects.

The analysis of the local student interviews and questionnaire presented above identified that there was concern with language competency and its link with content, communication, and ways students could re-visit the information and class discussions at their own pace. This concurred with the responses provided by the students studying English in Australia. Such an analysis matched our assumptions that began this research: ME students were different to those the authors had been accustomed to in Australian Universities. This confirmed the need for different teaching strategies that were cognizant of the student’s perceptions of what constitutes achievement and success. Of greater concern to us was the implicit game or strategy that students were employing as a means of passing course work assessments, and the time and effort placed on its development. Our concern about using appropriate pedagogy to help students learn content and conceptual ideas was further reinforced.

### Iteration 1: Language

This research formally commenced in 2008, shortly after one author started teaching in the UAE, and was initiated by the observation that the teaching techniques that had been developed, and which had subsequently proven to be successful<sup>2</sup> in an Australian university context were not automatically transferable to this new environment. Although the classes were no longer co-educational (males and females in the same class), the UAE student population, were now all from the same ethnic<sup>3</sup> background, and the language of instruction was not their L1.

While considerable literature exists on how to teach English as a second language (ESL) there appears to be a dearth of literature on how best to teach subject matter in English to non-NES students. Exceptions include Zhao et al.'s (2005) study focusing on the extent to which international students engage in effective educational practices, and Mahrous & Ahmed's (2010) research investigating the effectiveness of pedagogical tools across cultures. Much of the literature does not reflect the university setting at all, but concentrates on the school setting where the structure of learning reflects the development of learners, the school-based structure and curriculum content. Peters & Davis (1998) provide one of the few practical guides in teaching non-NES learners at the university level, and state that at many major US universities it is not unusual for one in three students to be non-NES.

Learning in a university carries with it its own set of expectations of success, related to both the student and the teaching academic. When the native language is supplanted by another, these expectations appear to change, which brings pedagogical implications. In universities where the language of instruction is not the native language of the students, it appears that there is still an unwritten drive or need to teach and focus on English – the grammar and related formalities, as this is what some believe indicates a student is competent in a discipline area. Using the term ‘linguistic capital’, Bourdieu & Passeron (1990, quoted by Findlow, 2006) highlight the problem of judging language rather than the thought that it represents.

A summary of the literature suggests that the quality of students’ thought and understanding in their subject area is not determined by their level of language, although this does not of course exclude the recognition that a certain threshold of language competency is required. Such a view ignores much about the learner, and about the learner differences existing in each country’s most able students. A focus on grammar to the detriment of content may lead to decreases in motivation, decreases in self-

esteem and self-efficacy and decreases in understanding of the actual content of the discipline or subject. The latter was certainly found to be the case in the focus group of local students and reinforced by the discussions of post-graduate students and so several strategies were put in place to enhance understanding of content.

The first strategy related to words and terminology. It was recognized that many of the words used in the field of Management Information Systems (MIS) would be unfamiliar to both NES and non-NES students alike, but explaining new words to non-NES is more difficult as there are fewer points of reference, and therefore it is more time-consuming. The selection of words and phrases that had been routinely used in an Australian setting was now more critical (or at least recognized as more critical) in this new environment as illustrated in the following teaching example noted by one of the authors:

Instructor: "In project management you use a methodology, because with no methodology you are using cunning and survival skills" [quoting from Thomsett, 1989].

Student: What does 'cunning' mean?

We considered 'cunning' to be a simple word but to the students this was not in regular usage and thus created difficulty in understanding the concept. Our immediate reaction to incidents of this type was to explicitly ask students to either advise the instructor immediately or else email the instructor should there be a specific word that was not understood by anyone. Not disrupting the flow of the lecture content was thought to be good teaching practice. Concurrently a glossary of non-discipline specific terms that the instructor believed might have been difficult to understand was provided on-line as an addendum to lecture notes available to students on Blackboard prior to the start of each week. This was an explicit attempt to assist students concentrate on the content and context of the subject matter rather than having to spend long periods translating words to make meaning.

The recognition that the meaning of individual words and terms is likely to significantly affect subject matter understanding prompted the researchers to investigate more closely the content of the prescribed text books that students had been assigned, as it was these they were reading, translating and copying into assessments tasks. There were indeed many examples found in the prescribed text books that were considered confusing to both NES and non-NES alike, and needed their own English/English translation before it was provided to students as lecture notes. One e-business example which sought to explain the differences between traditional and on-line selling is described in Table 2:

**Table 2: Linguistically simplified versions of textbook extracts.**

Original text (Turban et al., 2008, p44)	'Translation'
Diminished information asymmetry between buyers and sellers	Less differences in levels of understanding between buyers and sellers
Greater temporal separation between time of purchase and time of possession of physical products	More time between purchase and possession for physical products

The result of this strategy was a conscious effort to clarify such convoluted phrases and provide a simplified meaning; using words that we believed were of common usage. However, in the longer term and over many subjects it required much more vigorous investigation and analysis of the textbooks, with the outcome being that we are less reliant on text books. Reading material such as journal articles and case studies are now carefully scrutinized to reduce or eliminate as much of this 'cognitive drain' as possible. More emphasis was also given to asking the students whether they understand the

word/phrase in question, thus consciously moving from a reactive to a proactive approach. Rather than waiting for students to advise of words they did not understand we took more of a cautionary approach in explaining up front more words that they might not have understood.

This prompted us to consider how some articles were printed, and whether certain formats might be confusing for non-NES. The ubiquitous use of hyphenation in journals with multiple column printing may not be considered an issue for most English speakers but it seemed likely to impact on reading by learners of English. In a third strategy many examples were found and pointed out to the students, who in turn asked about hyphenated words which they came across. An example is included as Figure 2:

nology and the constant evolution of new hardware and software platforms, technical success should never be taken for granted. This is particularly true in the case of large, cutting-edge, projects. That being said, the more significant risk often lies in the area of customer acceptance. In assessing this risk, it is important to

**Figure 2: Examples of hyphenation (Keil, 1995, p. 439).**

After implementing all three strategies (providing a glossary, simplifying obscure language in textbooks and raising students' awareness of typographical complication such as hyphenation) we wondered if the emphasis required of the students on these issues were detracting from their learning and our teaching. It seemed that knowing the meaning of a word was important but the exact translation was not always what was intended in the context it was presented. We began to think that context and meaning making were absent from the students' approaches and were being diminished in our own approach. Thus we wanted to know what else might be a difficulty for these students.

Consequently both authors collaborated in a series of classroom interviews with separate groups of male and female UAE students in an attempt to better understand, from a student perspective, difficulties faced in learning subject matter in a foreign language. We re-confirmed that Arabic was the default language for the students; so unlike the situation in Zhang & Mi's (2010) case where Chinese speaking students were embedded within an English speaking environment, or in our own interview of ME postgraduate students in an English speaking country, these students' exposure to English was very limited. We recognized the little opportunity they had to use or listen to English, which prompted the implementation of a fourth strategy: recording lectures.

Although audio recording of lectures had become fairly commonplace throughout Australian universities this technology was not at that time widely used in the UAE. A digital voice recorder, costing only a few hundred dirhams, was purchased and used to record all lectures given in all the author's courses. The .wma files recorded were uploaded to Blackboard (each 75 minute lecture was approximately 14Mb in size) and could then be easily downloaded by students who could replay the lecture in their own time, thus providing additional exposure to English language. Our classroom interviews had indicated that students' exposure to English outside the classroom setting was limited, consisting of listening mainly to English language movies. We also noted that when speaking with each other they used Arabic and not English, and when asked why they did not practice speaking English with each other more, they admitted feeling 'awkward' communicating with fellow Arabic speakers in a foreign language. The response to the introduction of the audio recordings was very positive, and became for them an expected feature of particular courses. Statistics tracking available with Blackboard indicated that more than 80% of students were regularly accessing the recordings.

The topic of video recording lectures was also considered but immediately abandoned, as cultural issues relating to female students would not permit this type of activity. The use of video recordings in other environments might however be considered an extension to audio recording that is likely to provide an additional worthwhile learning resource for students.

Reflections from our first iteration can be summarized as focusing almost exclusively on matters relating to students' better understanding of English. The individual topics from the first iteration are listed in Table 3.

**Table 3: Summary of first iteration.**

Topic	Actions taken	Reflection
Words and phrases which may cause difficulties for students in learning content matter.	If word/phrase is unavoidable, provide glossary, otherwise replace with more commonly understood words/phrases.	Continue using glossary with specific requests to students to advise of difficult words.  Continue changing words to more commonly used one if possible.
How textbooks and articles can be written in language unsuitable for non-NES students.	More appropriate selection of text books and resources written in more simple English. Conscious awareness of the problem and a greater emphasis on the meaning of the concept in question.	There has been a tendency to use less textbooks and to provide alternative resources that have been scrutinized and judged to be more suitable for the particular course and level of study. Advised other faculty to consider similar actions.
Hyphenation and punctuation	Be aware of problems of hyphenation and punctuation; explain to students how and why this occurs.	The explanations to each class of students, while a small initiative, seems to have helped them look at the word as one, rather than trying to translate one part of this in the belief that it is a word.
Lack of opportunity for students to learn & practice English terms outside the classroom	Provide alternative forms of video/audio content that students can reference in their own time.	Continue providing audios of lectures, evaluate video alternatives.

At the end of iteration one it was realized that not only appropriate texts, understanding language and key terminology were important factors but that general good teaching practices and cultural issues also needed to be addressed. A further iteration needed to reflect the extent that each of these new factors

contributes to the repertoire of teaching and learning, and how they might be extended, emphasized or reshaped.

## Iteration 2: Good teaching practices

This iteration begins with a review of the larger context of assessment and why this is of concern, which is then integrated with a brief literature review. For this iteration an actioning section is introduced, in which we provide detail of the specific strategies we employed, matched against good teaching practices. Table 4 summarizes the strategies and practices and our reflections on each.

Although it may be assumed by many university teachers that there is a correlation between language competency and success at a university, it may be presumptuous to believe that language competency alone leads to better learning outcomes. Our observations and conversations with university teachers identified similar personal beliefs about the role of language competency in student work: they believed that a functional ability in the language of instruction is necessary, but it also appears that their desire for high standards in written and oral communication has seen an emphasis placed on these at the expense of learning and critical thinking within the context of a discipline. Focusing on grammar with its emphasis on the memorization of rules has also failed to develop an appropriate degree of communicative competence (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1983; Savignon, 1997).

As noted previously, assessing students is a critical aspect of education that deserves further investigation. Indeed, it may well be detrimental if assessment practices do not accurately reflect the subject matter being taught and its stated objectives. Assessments that overly focus on a student's ability to communicate in English may not accurately reflect student understanding of the subject matter. It may be convenient and easy to judge a student on their ability to write well and as close as possible to a native speaker, and errors in writing may consume the markers attention and influence the grade. Some would argue that they are unable to determine the extent of student's knowledge because of inept written language. However, we contest these views and claim the focus of marking should reflect above all the student's knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. There has long been an argument that traditional assessment may be as much about assessing an instructor's ability to teach as it is of a student's ability to recall subject matter. If assessment, as evidence of achieving learning outcomes, is based on a student's ability to communicate in the language of instruction rather than the stated content course objectives then the instructor may in reality merely be measuring their own effectiveness as a teacher of English, not as an instructor in their own discipline area. Our concern is that students must be fairly assessed on how well they know and understand content. We also understand that most students will translate this same knowledge into Arabic when seeking clarification with colleagues, further emphasizing the need to assess them accurately.

Related to assessment is the issue of broader curriculum design. In addressing an agreed common objective of more effective teaching for international students, Luxon & Peelo (2009) refer to Biggs et al.'s (2001) 3P's model, pointing out that simply stating that "This is our education. You have come here to experience this, and this is what we will give you" pays insufficient attention to the 'presage' factors in this model. In such circumstance it is not appropriate for expatriate faculty to merely say "this is what we teach, this is how we teach... and this is your opportunity to benefit from this experience". Appropriate and effective assessment approaches and teaching strategies are certainly required as our aim is to help students learn.

Although there appears a common theme in the internationalization literature to iteratively provide a 'better' learning environment for students, there is predominantly a stance of altering existing methods,

practices and curriculum rather than developing new ways of delivering subject content with a more radical approach. It would seem fundamental that looking to change pedagogy in university teaching, with the ultimate goal of improving or enhancing the learning of students, we first need to identify good or successful teaching principles, regardless of ethnic background or discipline or even of geographic setting. Without a foundation in good teaching, any practices that might be adopted for any particular subgroup may rest on weak foundations.

After identifying the lack of communication competence in our students (Iteration 1) we still needed to find out ways we could enhance their learning. As we became more objective and informed we pursued the literature on what constitutes good teaching practice, in order to reflect on and reconsider our own and our colleagues' teaching competencies. In their study of what makes successful teachers, Chickering & Gamson (1987) identify the following seven underlying principles (hereafter referred to as C1-7). Despite this research now being over 20 years old, it is an application of a variety of theories on learning translated into teaching practices. In this view, good teaching:

1. encourages contacts between students and faculty;
2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students;
3. uses active learning techniques;
4. gives prompt feedback;
5. emphasizes time on task;
6. communicates high expectations;
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning;

Later work such as that by Kerns et al. (2005) duplicated the earlier seven principles, albeit with differing terminologies, while adding three new concepts (hereafter called K1-3):

1. helping students productively manage their time;
2. enhancing motivation to learn;
3. helping students organize their knowledge;

Our observations and conversations from staff development workshops indicate that these principles are not a priority for some academic staff in the UAE. We became renewed in our convictions to pursue these in our teaching contexts and believed they could be useful while addressing the strategies devised in iteration 1. Implied in all the above principles are that students need to understand discipline content, but in a way that may be seen to drive their learning. Taking this one step further Barnett, (2007) implies that learning 'stuff' should be only part of university modern good teaching practices:

In the contemporary world, as well as it being a means of acquiring high-level knowledge, understanding and skills, higher education should foster the development of human qualities and dispositions, of certain modes of being, appropriate to the twenty-first century" (Barnett, 2007, p. 29).

Regardless of how efficiently it is achieved, by itself the mere learning (and hopefully retention) of content knowledge by the student is considered by Biggs (2003) to be an outmoded concept. In contrast, Biggs & Tang (2007) suggest that outcomes based teaching and learning, involves asking such questions as:

What do I intend my students to be able to do after my teaching that they couldn't do before, and to what standard? How do I supply learning activities that will help them achieve those outcomes? How do I assess them to see how well they have achieved them? (p. 1).

These researchers' perspectives suggest that focusing on correct grammar at the expense of understanding is equally fruitless as focusing on memorizing information. Understanding, and learning how to learn, is what is required. From an Information Technology discipline perspective Glen (2006) refers to a concept of 'managers of abstraction' – a role in which modern managers need no longer merely manage things or people but are responsible for particular features of the means to ends:

While most managers are responsible for delivering products and services, abstraction managers work to ensure that other managers deliver efficiently, effectively, securely, consistently, and appropriately (pp. 9-10).

This 'abstraction' concept, developed for an industrial environment, may have strong relevance in educational settings, where instructors can be considered as managers of their students' learning. Over twenty years earlier Moore & Stewart-Dore, (1984) had, in the quest for good teaching practices, suggested a similar concept for teachers:

The teacher's role becomes one of setting up the situations and conditions for exploratory talk, by establishing both focus and purpose, and by fostering a climate of learning (p. 33).

It should be obvious that the diverse nature of the issues involved ensures that any simple agreed definition of good teaching practice is going to be unlikely and that the answer may lie in taking a more holistic approach. Indeed it may be summarized that each factor individually may not clearly contribute to good teaching practice, but the absence of any may easily contribute to not having good teaching practices. Reflecting on iteration 1, the level of English understanding, according to Nation & Newton (2009), is likely to be critical in understanding content, unless instructors are able to isolate key words involved in the content. Nation & Newton go on to suggest a need for a balanced program for developing the skills of listening and speaking within a framework containing the four strands of:

1. Meaning-focused input
2. Meaning-focused output
3. Language-focused learning
4. Fluency development

Instructors need to encourage students to engage with the meaning of the input provided by the instructor or textbooks, by identifying words or terms that are unclear and bringing this to the instructor's attention at the time these words are introduced. This appears to conflict with creating uninterrupted thought and flow to a lecture as mentioned earlier. To do otherwise within a non-NES environment simply confuses the content of the message itself and puts an unnecessary emphasis on only understanding the meaning of yet another English word. If the ability to communicate (both orally and in writing) is at a level where concepts are not easily grasped because the instructor's use of vocabulary is not understood by students, then it should be the instructor's responsibility to modify their vocabulary to something that will be understood by their audiences.

### ***Actioning stage***

Various strategies were introduced into courses in an attempt to represent the good teaching principles described earlier in this section (C1-7 and K1-3) that were thought might best relate to the non-NES in the current teaching environment. In addition we reviewed our own personal teaching approaches and

were confident they had been incorporated into the actions. In this actioning section the selected teaching examples do not just represent one strategy but represent the combination of the principles, as no one principle stands on its own. These principles and the related strategies that best match each principle are listed below in Table 4, though it should be noted that different teaching situations require different emphases within these principles.

Firstly, an overall active and engaged learning approach was adopted reflecting a student-centred approach combined with Problem Based Learning (PBL), in which problems and issues were localized. Unlike school experiences where time on task is a feature of learning and good teaching, time on task in the university context relates to the development of economical approaches to learning content. A student centered approach requires students to spend time dedicated to quality and informed responses that will ultimately affect their grade. In project management terms a proactive rather than a reactive approach was actively encouraged to minimize time off task. Regular, small, weekly tutorial assessment tasks based on PBL were completed first individually and subsequently in teams, and then marked with feedback given at the beginning of the next tutorial. PBL encouraged and supported students to find answers and applications of the theories and concepts from their own environment with their own background cultural knowledge. Examples of this approach included referring to a project case study that took place in Taiwan, (Jewels, 2003) and asking students how they would re-run the project in the UAE, requiring them to anticipate the cultural barriers to implementing an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system within the UAE.

Secondly, the selected strategies had to provide opportunities for students to be positioned in relation to their discipline content within the wider, globalized world of business. The creative, open-ended nature of this form of PBL served not merely to equip students with one definitive answer but to illustrate the wide range of possible solutions relevant to the situation. This reflects an underlying principle of taking students from their positions of relative certainty, developed during their years at secondary schools, back to positions of relative uncertainty, better mirroring the uncertainty of the modern global business environment.

Thirdly, the strategies needed to allow students to affirm their own potential as learners, as university students and as leaders. Expectations of high achievement were made transparent through not one but several means: selected strategies as noted above, higher levels of thinking, co-authoring by faculty with students, and through assessment design and feedback. As the embedded culture appeared to be naturally socially collaborative, student thinking was extended by actively engaging them in teamwork strategies rather than the more normal group activities typical of many higher education environment practices, (Jewels & Albon, 2007). The instructor assumed leadership of the teams, directing students to complete the product or outcome, the form of which was originally negotiated with each other and with the instructor. Feedback to weekly tutorials was given to provide regular, consistent messages regarding how well students were achieving the expected quality levels. Serendipitously the effect was that it provided the instructor with regular and updated feedback on student capabilities and levels of prowess, completing a closed loop of ensuring high achievement.

In reflecting on our original statement that “we don’t teach English, we teach in English”, our assessment crucially put less emphasis on the standard of English language in answers: as long as the instructor could understand the general meaning and relevant details relating to the questions set, students were never principally assessed on their English language proficiency in the above tutorials or on projects and reports. This is not to say they were not given feedback on their language competency. Feedback was provided, often with a summary verbal comment relating to any improvement or the need to keep working on their language. However, their language competency did not dictate the mark

or grade allocated. A corollary to this approach was that students could no longer use the implied excuse that because they were learning in a non-native language, levels of assessment should be lower for them than that required for native speakers; there was to be no 'dumbing-down' of the curriculum simply because students were all non-NES. This had the effect of focusing students more on subject matter content than on English grammar, spelling and other presentation formalities. However, there remained a need to keep explicitly reminding students that studying in a non-native language is a great challenge and something to feel proud about. Recognizing the difficulties and explicitly telling students that you do recognize the difficulties, prevents feelings of isolation or even alienation from the university's English speaking culture.

### ***Reflections on iteration 2***

The good teaching principles are listed in Table 4 as the topic. Where possible we have analyzed our teaching to provide specific examples of each principle. Our reflections on the teaching will at times also refer to iteration 1 as at this point in time they merged.

At the end of iteration 2 it was clear that not only were we employing good teaching principles in the teaching of a variety of subjects but that students certainly warmed to the approaches and the often concomitant autonomy given to them. The teaching maintained the adopted way of dealing with vocabulary from iteration 1, but accepted more of the verbal translations that occurred in the many sideline discussions students would have in the class. Although students were accepting of the many teaching methods, they themselves seemed to be providing some leadership in the way they learn, such as this 'translation routine'. While we accepted their way of learning, it confirmed that we needed to examine cultural issues that might affect the way these ME students learn.

**Table 4: Summary of second iteration.**

Topics: good teaching principles	Actions Taken	Reflection
(C1) Encourage contacts between students and faculty.	Continued modification of vocabulary. Continued weekly consultation times for students. Encouraging negotiation on the type and depth of assessment tasks.	Classroom interaction showing respect for students' knowledge, culture and ways of learning. Remain more conscious of individual words and ask in 'real-time' if students understand words. Adding more of student words and knowledge.
(C2) Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students.	Students solve problems individually then in pairs, eventually sharing with the teacher. Using own culture and student culture to emphasize key principles and the application of concepts. Using student work as an opportunity to give feedback on their capabilities and levels of prowess. Using a closed loop approach to learning. Understand and empathize with learning in L2. Want students to feel proud of their work and achievements.	To continue all of these actions. Students love the opportunity of applying their perspective and understanding
(C3) Use active learning techniques	Localizing problems and drawing on students' background knowledge for solutions. Regular, engaging weekly tutorials based on PBL.	To continue plus seek more local context examples. There is a better balance of active and the obligatory passive approach (e.g. lecture). Students have questions and they are learning to ask these, demonstrating their engagement as active learners.

<p>(C4) Give prompt feedback</p>	<p>Mark weekly tutorials and return these with feedback at the commencement of the next tutorial.</p> <p>Provide feedback on how well students are achieving expected quality levels- content knowledge – in writing, and presentation quality often verbally.</p> <p>Respond to questions online (via Blackboard)</p>	<p>Continue weekly tutorials for 3rd year students but fortnightly tutorials for final year student. Create more depth to the work students are capable of achieving. Provide feedback on the specific criteria of the task to individuals or the group - this seemed to resonate well with students. They wanted to know what they did well and also how to improve.</p>
<p>(C5) Emphasize time on task.</p>	<p>Adopt a student centered approach.</p> <p>Encourage students to plan their work.</p> <p>Adhere to due dates for assessment tasks.</p>	<p>To continue and strengthen a student centered approach which will assist to transition students from a memorization approach to a concept driven approach to learning.</p>
<p>(C6) Communicate high expectations.</p>	<p>Co-authoring with students.</p> <p>Assessment design involving higher levels of thinking in weekly tutorial work.</p> <p>Using a problem based approach and complex open-ended problems.</p> <p>Assessment based on the product and outcomes of higher level thinking made explicit to students.</p> <p>Use modeling to illustrate how reference articles are referenced, and use an educational approach to plagiarism.</p> <p>Emphasize that students have considerable knowledge and link this to the course content.</p>	<p>To continue and encourage students to write at an academic, publishable standard.</p> <p>PBL works extremely well as students take a variety of pathways to explore an issue and reach conclusions.</p>

<p>(C7) Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.</p>	<p>Understand the transitioning from relative certainty to relative uncertainty; structures in Arabic are used to write in English; defer to a habit of translating English words to Arabic, often losing the intended meaning; Leverage the socially collaborative 'majlis' culture. Team work including negotiation with teacher and each other.</p>	<p>Accept discussions in Arabic, value language and cultural diversity, draw on local experiences while challenging their interpretations. Continue to build, and monitor team performances. I allow explanations to each other to be made in Arabic then hear a summary of their final interpretation and offer comments.</p>
<p>(K1) Help students to manage their time productively.</p>	<p>Weekly tasks Model and encourage a proactive rather than a reactive approach to planning and performance.</p>	<p>Continue to drive for proactivity.</p>
<p>(K2) Enhance motivation to learn</p>	<p>Use methods to actively promote the understanding of personality differences (Myer Briggs Type Indicator) and the relationship of these differences to the work environment. Respect students' culture. Defer to their ability to navigate the language. Provide relevant problems that give permission for them to use their culture. Blend Arab culture with Western culture. Provide audio of lectures Provide choice and negotiation</p>	<p>Continue using Myer Briggs Type Indicator and continue deferring to students' culture and examples from their culture. Continue to build into assessment real products such as journal articles or conference presentations</p>
<p>(K3) Help students organize their knowledge.</p>	<p>Introduce EndNote bibliographical software. Assist students to link knowledge of one course/subject with others. Present the course of study holistically and not as discrete topics to be mastered and memorized.</p>	<p>Continue and embed EndNote and referencing in all assessments.</p>

### Iteration 3: Culture

This final iteration explores culture from six perspectives, with reference to a literature review. This is followed by an actioning stage and a reflection on this iteration. At the formal commencement of this research the authors had pondered the question of whether cultural issues might affect how their Arab students learned. The belief that teaching and learning practices may not transfer easily between ethnic groups had however already been proposed by Watkins & Biggs (2001) who suggested that a number of accepted principles of Western educational psychology may not be applicable to the Chinese learner. Research in understanding the different learning perspectives of EAL (English as an additional language) students had also been undertaken at the Malaysian campus of an Australian university, (Albon & Jewels, 2007) providing insights into how Asian students, because of their cultural and educational backgrounds, differed from Western students in their learning strategies. While there is evidence in the literature confirming that various ethnic groups do learn differently, and though there has been considerable research undertaken on English language competency for Arab or ME students, there is less evidence of teaching practice research specifically for Arab students. Although this iteration primarily set out to investigate Arab cultural patterns, it was soon realized that in reality it was also the understanding, sensitivity and behavior towards those patterns by other stakeholders (such as non-Arab instructors) that was to provide its main benefits. These issues have been summarized in the literature as cultural sensitivity, cultural competence (Nieto & Booth, 2010) and communicative competence, (Canale, 1983; Savignon, 1997), and all were identified as having an impact on teaching effectiveness.

#### ***Perspectives and related literature review***

The six perspectives presented here are: linguistic relativity, ethnocentrism, *musayara*, social collaboration, high and low context, and monochronic and polychronic time.

#### **Linguistic relativity**

Linguistic relativity is the claim that culture, through language, affects the way in which we think, and especially our classification of the experienced world (Gumburz & Levinson, 1996), and involves the idea that the varying cultural concepts and categories inherent within different languages affect the cognitive classification of the experienced world in such a way that speakers of different languages think and behave differently because of it. Randall (2009) for example, when discussing the mechanics of reading in a UAE context, argues that text-processing strategies are not universal, but are language specific. Recent research involving Arab EFL students (Ghaith & Diab, 2006; Midraj et al., 2008) have addressed the issue of factors relating to English language competency but there is still a dearth of literature on how that language competency affects learning discipline content for non-NES Arab students. According to Anderson & McGuire (2009) reading English by Arab learners in the Gulf region presents far greater difficulties than for non-native English readers accustomed to similar Latin alphabets. Arab learners are being asked to learn not only a new alphabet, but different ways of processing text and accessing meaning:

Reading, as a mental act, is considerably more complex than simple heuristic models suggest. What was once perhaps considered a deficit in learners is perhaps better seen as a deficit in our understanding of what it takes to be a reader (p7).

Anderson & McGuire's book discusses strategies that can be applied for (in particular) UAE students and for the practitioner to gain a better understanding of the reading culture in the Arabian Gulf region.

The literature does contain clues as to why Arab students may learn differently from other ethnic groups, but these issues really only became understandable after some considerable time working with Arab students and reflecting on that experience. Such is the strength of an action research methodology.

### **Ethnocentrism**

The view, which may be equally true for teachers as for students, that the learning environments they have been familiar with during their own lives is representative of learning environments in general is a natural one, and it may lead to using it as a model in their own practices (Ansell, 2004). The phenomenon of ethnocentrism<sup>4</sup> occurs when, without a conscious awareness of the differences between cultures, one tends to see differences through the prism of one's own culture: "When ethnocentrism occurs, cultural differences are no longer neutral, but rather negative" (Zaharna, 1995, p. 242). If Arab students do indeed behave and learn differently from other groups of students then we might somehow have to embrace these differences rather than to shun them. Peelo & Luxon (2007, pp. 68-59) cite Ryan (2000, p. 58): "...many international students complain that their courses offer an almost exclusively anglocentric view in some areas of study, and that this view is presented as if it were universal". As teachers we may need to consider that these ME students' identities are culturally embedded and as a social collective group they interact in ways that preserve their cultural identities (Ng, 2007, p. 39).

### **Musayara**

The concept of *musayara* is discussed by Griefat & Katriel (1989) who suggests that it encapsulates much that is distinctive to Arabic speechways and interpersonal conduct, and that 'doing *musayara*' is a major communicative vehicle for the maintenance of social relations and the cultivation of traditional patterns. Broadly translated, *musayara* means 'going along with', indicating neither open agreement nor open disagreement with a particular point of view. Thus, Arab students may be more reluctant to question any instructor unless there has been a clear acknowledgement made that questioning is not considered an impolite act, and subsequently is encouraged.

### **Social collaboration**

According to Sitaram & Codgell (1976), individuality is a primary value in Western cultures, of secondary importance in African culture and of little importance in Eastern and Muslim cultures. There are in the UAE in particular, strong family connections that indicate a socially collaborative society indicative of the ones discussed by Hall & Hall (2003):

Japanese, Arab and Mediterranean people who have extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues and clients and who are involved in close personal relationships are high-context. As a result, for most normal transactions in daily life, they do not require, nor do they expect, much in-depth, background information. (pp. 200-201).

### **High vs low context**

Hall (1976) describes high context (HC) communicational messages as ones in which "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized within the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted parts of the message" (p. 91). This has significant implications for how content is presented to students and might further emphasize Palmer's (1998) belief that we teach not what we know but who we are. In high-context cultures meaning is contextual rather than explicit, which might explain the reluctance by some Arab students, as we normally expect in a Western university to 'answer the question as set'. Levine (1985) discusses this issue in terms of direct (e.g.

Jewels, T. & Albon, R. (2012). "We don't teach English, we teach *in* English": teaching non-native English speaking university students. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, 9(1). <http://lthe.zu.ac.ae>

American) and indirect (e.g. Arab) communication styles, where the latter, though ambiguous, is more 'emotionally rich'. Zaharna (1995) summarizes her discussion of better understanding Arab communication preferences by stating:

For the Arab culture, language appears to be a social tool used in the weaving of society. Emphasis is on form over function, affect over accuracy, and image over meaning. (p253)

An example used in a Project Management course relating to understanding the need to effectively monitor project progress at all times included the Arabic proverb, "if you know ... then it's a disaster, but if you don't know... then it's a bigger disaster". This simple phrase was sufficient for students to comprehend the value of having project metrics in place without having to describe quantitatively why metrics are so important.

### **Monochronic & polychronic time**

In what may have much significance over Arab student behavior patterns, Hall & Hall (2003) discuss the concept of monochronic versus polychronic time, describing monochronic-time cultures as job oriented whereas polychronic-time cultures are people oriented. Arabic cultures are generally described as polychronic, where the notion of being on time is looser than monochronic. The Arab idea of the *majlis*, where a sheikh or family elder will simultaneously talk to a number of people at the same time about a diverse range of topics, may best illustrate how this culture differs from the Western norm of allocating a specific time attending to each topic, completing it and only then moving on to the next.

### **Actioning stage**

The six perspectives have been considered alongside the good teaching practices and the approaches to enhance language competency, making individual identification of each perspective rather difficult. For example reading is a holistic concept involving aspects from each of the iterations. In what seems paradoxical, it has been clearly established that, even though the Arabic language itself appears to be richer and more descriptive than English, the Arabic culture is not one that lends itself to reading, either in Arabic or in English (Khoury & Duzgun, 2009). It was realized early in this research that students were not 'properly' reading, i.e. fully comprehending the subject matter being given as weekly reading assignments. Some students had commented in the interviews that they had spent literally days reading and attempting to comprehend a single ten-page weekly handout. Some students also admitted to merely stopping making the effort to read as, because of other academic demands, they could not afford the time to dedicate to this time consuming activity. While it is accepted that some students (as is the case with students in every other part of the world) might just have been simply too lazy to do the reading, the fact remained that dedicated and hard-working students were still obligated to spending excessive amounts of time undertaking this type of activity. It prompted the question of whether this same amount of student energy might not be better applied in a different form.

In addressing this reading issue several approaches were adopted. First the amount of reading students were required to do was investigated, and alternative forms of weekly assignments that minimized the reading component were introduced. Video sources supplementing readings were used more frequently, internet sources were embedded within the lecture notes and more divergent problems employed which demanded that answers be discussed between students. In earlier iterations it had been clearly established that one of the embedded strengths of this Arabic student culture was in its social collaboration and its ability to share knowledge. In reminding ourselves that our primary tasks was to teach subject matter content, or to help students learn, a conscious decision was made to adopt pedagogical styles that concentrated on student strengths while minimizing their weaknesses. We believed that our role was not to teach students how to more effectively comprehend readings, nor to

become avid readers through the love of books (we did not teach English, we taught in English). But we did recognize that reading in English required students to be aware of past, present and future tense, the concept of a sentence and its related punctuation, and the subject of a sentence and use of personal pronouns. However, the use of the internet enabled students to work with other dimensions of multiliteracy and use graphics, illustrations, signs symbols, page layout, colour, and font differences to interpret information.

An example of using an internet source and linking it with social collaboration was a tutorial that required students to compare the UAE Carrefour department store web site with that of the Singapore Carrefour department web site, and to discuss why each had developed their own particular styles. Providing learning in this way enabled students to learn the design of these stores without engaging in onerous reading of text.

The theme of concentrating on student strengths and minimizing their weaknesses flowed on into other areas. One of the inherent strengths of a non-NES student is simply that — they are non-NES, so they have another native language they can use. A simple acknowledgement of the value of being bilingual, (or greater than bi- in some cases) appeared to give students more confidence. There was never an objection to students trying to explain a difficult concept to their peers in their native language, although there would then be a requirement to summarize it back in English. The use of a third language embedded into lectures also appeared to dull the Arabic/English dichotomy. In explaining the concept that when introducing any new information system there is likely to be a drop off in overall performance before any gains are made, the French term ‘reculer pour mieux sauter’ was used. In explaining that in project change management there are stakeholders who will see the opportunity in the change but many others who will only see the danger, the Chinese word ‘危機’ (wei-ji), meaning ‘risk’ or ‘crisis’ was referred to; this is literally a combination of two characters, one meaning ‘threat’ (danger) the other meaning ‘opportunity’ (Xie & Wang, 2003).

In a further appreciation of the student’s native language there are also Arabic words that can actually enhance an established Western concept and if understood can actively support student learning. In Blake and Mouton’s (1964) widely used conflict resolution model, students themselves indicated that they believed that the Arabic term *musayara* supplemented the standard techniques of confrontation, compromise, smoothing, forcing and withdrawal. In what is particularly relevant for this region this technique is indeed not adequately covered as part of the long established model and hence was subsequently added as an additional local conflict resolution technique.

As yet the research/practitioners have been unable to properly interpret the implications for the Arabic polychronic time concept. We believe that it does not refer to simply being late with assessments (or even asking for extensions) but may involve how Arabic students can effectively perform multiple simultaneous tasks without the problems associated with other groups of students only being able to concentrate on one thing at any one time. However, until we can establish whether a student is capable of understanding a topic whilst texting or reading their emails, we will continue to enforce a mobile phone ban in classes.

### **Reflections on iteration 3**

The outcomes from iteration 3 are continually being applied. It is this particular iteration where we feel we are the learners. We believe that the reciprocity of cultural sensitivity, cultural competence (Nieto & Booth, 2010) and communicative competence (Canale, 1983; Savignon, 1997) have impacted on our teaching effectiveness and student’s learning. For example, as much as we believe we use the six cultural themes presented in the iteration, being aware of them and actually identifying them is another

matter. Until recently it was not understood why students would repeat subject matter in their writing until it was relayed to us that this is the written structure of Arabic. For example a student wrote: The project manager, he the project manager attempted to .....". We also recognized this was a format used by less linguistically competent students.

The decision to adopt a student-centered and active approach to learning that included some negotiation seems to have met with great acceptance by the students. We believe that this may be, in part, due to better understanding the six cultural concepts.

## Summary

The idea of how to better cater to ME students thus had its foundation in an Australian environment, though genuine research did not take place until provided with an opportunity to do so in the UAE specifically on behalf of its mainly Arab students. Though most of the current literature on Arab learning relates directly or indirectly to language competency, with the implicit belief that a better understanding of English will result in better learning outcomes, this research has indicated that alternative strategies can be adopted for helping provide better teaching and more importantly better learning outcomes for these non-NES students. This ongoing action research project set out to provide a framework for teaching such students in the UAE, but it has broader implications for any faculty teaching in a language that is not the native language of their students. Whilst instructors need not necessarily agree with the need, nor be prepared to make any allowances for (in this case) an Arab(ic) way of learning, they should still be aware of these differences, and we trust that this paper will provide some awareness. The model presented suggests that teachers should firstly be aware of language differences and student difficulties when striving for communicative competence in the language of instruction. Not to be daunted by the lack of 'good' English, we suggest it is helpful to review teaching practices and reflect on how best each teacher can enhance the learning of content for students as there is a lot we can offer. Finally we propose teachers find a framework for examining culture which may impact on teaching as well as student's progress to learn content. A better understanding of how to provide better instruction in subject matter while concomitantly taking into account a student's relative weakness in the language of instruction has significant implications for a wide spectrum of trans-national learning environments. Palfreyman (2007) cites Willis's term 'ethnographic imagination' (p. 1) in drawing attention to the need for higher education to embrace cultural issues and for teachers to "engage in relatively new teaching practices" (p. 1). Similarly, Ng (2007) noted the prevalence of a "lack of understanding of students' cultures [that] may result in instructors misinterpreting students' intellectual abilities" (p. 50).

## Limitations

It is considered that the strength of this research is in its limitation to a single ethnic type of non-NES students, yet this strength also unfortunately contributes to its weakness, i.e. the uncertain transferability of the data into diverse ethnic student group settings. Having the opportunity to concentrate on a single homogenous group did however provide the research/practitioners with a clearer vision of the issues relating to teaching non-NES, without also having to be concerned about the dynamics between multiethnic cohorts.

Our critical reflections after three iterations, a more extensive review of the literature and our analysis of the UAE interviews, confirmed the need to address three interrelated issues associated with better teaching for Arab students. The issues were considered to be interrelated because there was no distinct boundary between each of them. In the preliminary stages of this research it was certainly alluring to

simply focus on the area of 'Good teaching practices for Arab students', as this was an envisaged research theme. Yet, without a foundation in what can be described as 'Good teaching practices for non-NES students', the research subset of teaching Arab students was likely to become isolated and deficient. Similarly, although it commonly appears in the literature as a stand-alone topic, 'good teaching practices for non-NES students' are similarly a subset of 'common good teaching practices'. While not deviating from the original objective of investigating better teaching practices for our own Arab students, the decision taken to incorporate all three areas into this research project, in the belief that it may provide a more holistic approach for better understanding teaching and learning strategies for Arab students in particular and possibly for other non-NES students in general we believe was justified.

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<sup>1</sup> *Iftar* is the sunset breaking of the daylight fast in the holy month of Ramadan: Muslims have neither eaten nor drunk since sunrise. It should be noted that Asian students from Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei were also predominantly Muslim; however, this research is focusing on ethnic Arab issues, rather than religious differences per se (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). The iftar example does indicate however how fasting students, who have had neither food nor water for over 12 hours, might not be in the right frame of mind for studying at the precise time that they are allowed to break their fast.

<sup>2</sup> Both authors had been the recipient of several university and national teaching awards.

<sup>3</sup> An ethnic group (or ethnicity) is a group of people whose members identify with each other, through a common heritage, often consisting of a common language, a common culture (often including a shared religion) and an ideology that stresses common ancestry or endogamy (Seidner, 1982, pp. 2-3).

<sup>4</sup> "Any policy, research, and action on the part of individuals or institutions that promote (intentionally or unintentionally), the believed superiority of one group, profession or set of ideals over another" (Airhihenbuwa & Ludwig, 2002).