Understanding cultural conflict in EFL classrooms in the UAE

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Abstract

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, it is common for instructors and students to come from very different cultural backgrounds. Instructors who leave their home countries and go to teach abroad may have trouble adjusting to the culture of their new teaching context, and cultural misunderstandings that interfere with learning may occur in the classroom (Kramsch, 1993). This research focused on cultural conflicts between Western, native English-speaking instructors and their Arab students at two university-level EFL programs in the UAE. Questionnaires and interviews were used to discover the details of specific classroom cultural conflicts and categorize them. Nine categories of classroom cultural conflicts were identified, the major ones being inappropriate materials/discussion topics, mixed-gender issues, and disrespect for religious customs.

Keywords: Intercultural competence; cultural conflict; culture in EFL classrooms; UAE culture; Western culture

1. Introduction

The nature of EFL teaching – spanning nationalities, ethnicities, and countries – means that teachers and their students may often come from different cultural backgrounds. Many EFL instructors who have grown up in and received their education from English-speaking countries may experience difficulty adjusting to the culture of their students when they go teach abroad (Al-Issa, 2005; Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2004). Teachers who are fully qualified to teach English may still feel anxiety in the classroom when confronted with students whose cultures and learning practices are very different from their own. These feelings of anxiety and a lack of understanding of the students' culture can lead to conflicts in the classroom that interfere with learning (Kramsch, 1993; Al-Issa, 2005).

In addition, some native English-speaking instructors teaching abroad in cultures very different from their own may not realize that the conflicts they are encountering in the classroom actually stem from these cultural differences. The skills these

teachers will use to overcome this cultural divide fall into the category of Intercultural Competence (ICC). ICC is "an individual's worldview, and in turn, his or her perceptions and responses to cultural difference" (DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009, p. 438). Teachers with well-developed ICC - whether innate or obtained over years of experience or during a teacher training program – will be able to effectively alter and adapt their teaching practices and re-orient themselves toward their host culture in ways that allow them to engage with students from different cultural backgrounds.

In the UAE in particular, where the host culture is very different from the US, the UK, and other English-speaking countries, instructors who are native speakers of English may have very little experience with or knowledge of the host culture. Instructors with well-developed ICC may need time and training to adjust to their very new, very foreign environment, while those without skills in ICC may flounder. These instructors may be fully qualified in terms of pedagogical training or subject matter knowledge, but the effectiveness of their teaching may be diminished by a lack of skills in dealing with student/teacher cultural conflicts that arise in the classroom. These conflicts may be obvious to the instructor, as might be the case for someone aware of the principles of ICC, or they might not be at all aware that problems arising in the classroom stem from cultural differences. Cultural conflicts that are ongoing and unresolved – especially those in the EFL classroom, where the English language is sometimes the source of cultural barriers – can create a culturally hostile or insensitive environment that is not conducive to learning. Furthermore, even instructors who are aware of cultural problems in the classroom, and have perhaps even dealt with them successfully in other contexts more similar to their home culture, may not know how to effectively resolve these issues.

In order to find out more about intercultural competence in native-speaking EFL instructors in the UAE, this research seeks to characterize the conflicts that occur between native English-speaking teachers and Arab students in EFL classrooms in the UAE.

1.1. Significance of this research

The Arabian Gulf is an increasingly popular destination for English teachers seeking work overseas (Wages, 2012). The UAE is a particularly attractive choice for English teachers from countries such as the US, UK, and Australia, because it offers a style of living to expatriates that is on par with what they are used to in their home countries.

However, these external similarities to Western nations can be deceiving. When expatriates who are native speakers of English come in contact with other members of UAE society, it becomes clear that they are "not in Kansas anymore." Instructors who assume that relatively permissive behavior and dress standards out and about in Dubai translate to a similarly liberal atmosphere in the classroom may not be sensitive enough to the very real cultural influences at work on their students and in society at large. A 2012 news story in Britain's *The Sun* frames itself as a cautionary

tale for UK citizens seeking work in Dubai, relating the experiences of British expats in the UAE who ended up in jail for behavior that would be completely permissible in the UK and other Western countries. Charlotte Adams, a British resident of Dubai who spent a month in jail for kissing a man in public, warns: "Even though Dubai looks glamorous and Western, it isn't…It's a strict Islamic country, after all" (Roberts, 2012).

This research seeks to identify the kinds of conflicts that occur in the classroom between instructors and students, as well as these instructors' and students' attitudes toward culture in the classroom. A clear report on the state of instructor intercultural competence in native-speaker-taught English classrooms in the UAE could go a long way toward illustrating whether it is enough for instructors to only be qualified to teach their subject matter. This research aims to show whether instructors would benefit from training to improve their intercultural competence before or soon after their arrival in the UAE, in order to ensure that when they enter the classroom, they are committed to creating a culturally welcoming environment that will not alienate students and will contribute positively to learning. Research detailing the kinds of cultural conflicts that occur between native English-speaking instructors and university students in the UAE can be very useful to schools or departments seeking to implement training programs that will produce instructors with the above-mentioned attributes.

1.2. A definition of culture

In order to determine the kinds of conflicts that occur in EFL classrooms in the UAE, it is necessary to formulate a working definition of culture, especially regarding Western native English-speaking (NES) instructors and their Arab students.

Hamad (1999) defines culture as "one form of social, cognitive and inherited knowledge in addition to its actual manifestation in a form of behavior," and also references Sapir's (1921) assertion that culture is "what a society does and thinks" (p. 40). Protheroe and Barsdate (1992) add that one's culture is one's "ways of being, knowing, and doing" (p. 1). In these definitions, two components of culture are clear: beliefs on the one hand, and actions on the other. These beliefs and actions are necessarily informed by Sapir's (1921) "socially inherited" factors, which may include religion, style of upbringing, method of education, attitudes toward women, and more, all existing in what Keesing (1974) describes as "the game being played in the society into which [one is] born" (cited in Hamad, 1999, p. 40). Both the belief side of culture and the action side of culture are informed by society at large, but these beliefs and actions are formulated on an individual basis. It is clear that culture is a deeply held, at once individual and collectivized concept, resistant to change and prominent in shaping the way someone understands the world surrounding them.

Cortazzi and Jin (1999) add an additional component to these definitions when they suggest that "culture can be seen as the framework of assumptions, ideas, and beliefs that are used to interpret other people's actions, words, and patterns of thinking" (p.

197). This addition shifts the perspective of the definition of culture to include how one perceives others, whether those others share one's culture or not. This aspect of culture is especially important for this research, since it allows for culture to exist not in isolation, but in constant relation to other people and other cultures: in other words, it is "a social construct, the product of self and other perceptions" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 205). In classrooms featuring Western NES instructors and Arab students, it is this "framework of…beliefs" that is used to "interpret" the actions of others that is most relevant to this research (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, p. 197).

Culture, therefore, involves what people do and what people think, according to the ways they have been influenced by the society in which they participate. Culture exists at once on an individual level and a societal level, and the latter informs the former. Moving outside of the individual's thoughts and actions, culture also involves how one responds to the thoughts and actions of other people. This response may be characterized by a misunderstanding of others' cultures, or it may seek to include them in a wider context of different cultures. This research takes the first element of culture – the way people think and act – as a basis for exploring more about the second element of culture – how people respond to the thoughts and actions of others. Especially relevant are the times when any differences in thought and action (culture), particularly in the classroom, lead to conflict that interferes with learning, for "culture is difference, variability, and always a potential source of conflict when one culture enters into contact with another" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 1).

If culture is, as discussed above, a system of beliefs and actions informed by society and formed individually, which in turn influences one's interpretations of others, how do these elements differ between Western NES instructors and the students they teach in the UAE? Several differences between these two populations have been noted in the literature. Darwish and Huber (2003) note a focus on the "private self," or an individualistic orientation, in North America and Europe, compared to a more collectivistic orientation in the Middle East (p. 48). Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov rate the United States, UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand as the most individualistic societies, with index scores in the 80s and 90s (2010, p. 96). The same study ranked Arab societies as among the most collectivistic, with index scores in the 30s. Hofstede, et al.'s 2010 research also ranked the United States and other "Anglo" countries as being disparate from Arab societies in other areas, such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, gender roles, and restraint. In addition, Hall's 1976 research on high-context societies and low-context societies puts Arabs in the first category and Westerners in the second (cited in Strong, 2012, p.90; see also Al-Issa, 2005).

Such substantial differences in culture between students and teachers mean that

> students from different cultural backgrounds may view, interpret, evaluate and react differently to what the teacher says and does in the classroom. Teachers therefore have to constantly bear in mind that the more substantial the differences in cultural background between sender and receiver involved in the communicative process, the

> more substantial the differences in the meaning attached to the message and social behavior will be. (Le Roux, 2002, p. 38)

This is in agreement with Protheroe and Barsdate (1992), who point out that culture affects not "what students learn, but how students learn" (p. 1).

1.3. The nature of intercultural conflicts

Students taught by teachers who come from a culture different from their own often wish that the teachers would take the time to familiarize themselves with important aspects of the host culture. Prodromou (1992) found that 74 percent of intermediate/advanced students (in Greece) felt that teachers from abroad should be familiar with their (the host) culture.

Al-Issa (2005) describes a few of the kinds of cross-cultural conflicts that can occur in classrooms in the UAE. These encounters include:

- casual contact between the sexes, which is acceptable in one individual's culture but not the other
- feedback on academic work that is worded appropriately for one culture but is offensive or discouraging in the other
- different expectations on eye contact, body language, etc. during class presentations
- class material that is acceptable to one culture but offensive to another
- controversial opinions that run counter to the host culture introduced in class by the teacher

These kinds of conflicts – and others yet to be described in the literature – are particularly prone to happen in ESL/EFL classrooms. It is the aim of this research to find out more about the kinds of cultural conflicts that occur in EFL classrooms in the UAE.

2. Method

Two EFL programs at two universities in the UAE were selected for study in this research: the Bridge Program at the American University of Sharjah (AUS); and the Preparatory Program at Khalifa University (KU) in Sharjah. The American University of Sharjah is a private university catering to many nationalities, while Khalifa University is a public, non-federal university funded by Abu Dhabi that provides 100% tuition assistance for Emiratis, and whose student body is almost entirely Emirati. In addition, AUS and KU offer a variety of NES faculty across several nationalities and levels of experience to participate in this research. These two universities have been selected for this research because they offer a good representative sample of university instructors and students in the UAE, encompassing the private/public university experience as well as a mixed student body and a dominant Emirati student body. Therefore, the results of this study are expected to be relevant to both private and public universities in the UAE and wider Gulf region.

The EFL programs at both AUS and KU are designed to function as foundation-year English programs for students who have been admitted to university but whose academic English skills (as measured by TOEFL/IELTS scores) are not sufficient to allow them to begin their majors.

2.1. Participant instructors

Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the instructor respondents who identified as Western NES.

Table 1. Demographic information of NES instructor respondents

#	M/F	Nationality	Native Language	Total Teaching Experience	UAE Teaching Experience
1	F	British	English	16+	16+
2	F	British	English	16+	12-15
3	M	British	English	16+	8-11
4	F	US	English	16+	12-15
5	F	US	English	16+	12-15
6	F	British	English	16+	12-15
7	M	Canadian	English	12-15	8-11
8	F	Irish	English	12-15	8-11
9	F	UK	English	8-11	4-7
10	F	British	English	16+	16+
11	F	Irish	English and Irish	16+	16+
12	F	British	English	12-15	12-15
13	F	US	English	0-3	0-3
14	F	US	English	16+	16+

The instructor respondents indicated additional teaching experience in Afghanistan, Australia, Benin, Canada, China, Eritrea, France, Germany, Greece, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, Tunisia, the UK, the United States, and Vietnam. They also indicated proficiency in speaking languages other than English, such as Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Irish, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

2.2. Participant students

The two universities also offer a good variety in student body nationalities for this research. The American University of Sharjah, a private institution, has a student body of 4688 undergraduates featuring students from more than 11 different countries, including 21% from the UAE and a further 63% from Arab countries such as Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Syria (AUS Spring 2013 Fast Facts). At the time of research, its Bridge (EFL) Program had 229 students enrolled. The Bridge Program requires that students score a 6 on the IELTS (International English

Language Testing System) in order to graduate from the program and continue to their major

Khalifa University is a nationally funded public university and, as such, features a mostly Emirati student body. Four years ago, the university opened up to women and non-Emiratis; women now make up approximately half of the student body, while non-Emiratis make up approximately 5% of the student body. There are two campuses: one in Abu Dhabi, and one in Sharjah. In this research, only the Sharjah campus was visited. At the time of research, the Preparatory (EFL) Program at KU had 46 students enrolled, all of whom were Emirati. The Preparatory Program requires that students score a 6 on the IELTS in order to graduate from the program and continue to their major.

This investigation of the student bodies at each university yielded the demographic information contained in Table 2.

Table 2. EFL Students at AUS and KU

Institution	Total Enrollment	EFL Enrollment	Nationalities Represented	% Arab	% Emirati
American University of Sharjah	4688	229	14	90	33
Khalifa University	1212	46	1	100	100

A total of 75 students completed the questionnaire. Twenty-one of these students were from Khalifa University and the remaining 54 were from the American University of Sharjah. In accordance with the design of this research, the responses of four students were excluded from analysis, as they indicated students who were not Arab. The remaining 71 student respondents all reported Arabic as their native language and Islam as their religion. They represented 10 different Arab nationalities. Half of the student respondents (51%) were Emirati. A quarter of them were Saudi. The remainder of the students indicated their nationality as Egyptian, Jordanian, Kuwaiti, Libyan, Palestinian, Sudanese, Syrian, or Yemeni. A complete list of the student respondents can be found in the Appendix.

2.3. Instruments

After approval of the research design and instruments from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was granted, permission was obtained from each institution to administer questionnaires to the instructors and students involved in the foundation-year English programs. In the initial stages of this research, questionnaires were administered to all available instructors and students. Afterward, in accordance with IRB protocol, only the responses of NES instructors and Arab students were included in this research. Interviews with volunteer participants (both instructors and students) were also conducted.

2.4. Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were developed for use in this research: one for instructors, and one for students. The questionnaires asked for some biographical data from each participant in order to gather relevant information about their background. The questionnaires then featured an open-ended question, which gave respondents an opportunity to provide specific details about cultural conflicts they have encountered in the classroom ("Is there an incident related to cultural differences in your UAE classroom that you can describe and how you handled it?" for instructors; and "Have you ever felt angry, confused, sad, disrespected, or embarrassed because of something your teacher did? Tell me about what happened" for students).

The instructor questionnaire was administered online. At each university, the director of the EFL Program was provided with a secure link to the online questionnaire, which they then distributed via email to all teaching staff in the program. The results were automatically recorded on an online spreadsheet as each questionnaire was completed.

The student questionnaire was administered in person, in a hard-copy format. At Khalifa University, access was provided by the program director to the students after they had completed an exam. The students remained at their desks in the testing hall and completed the questionnaire. At the American University of Sharjah, access was provided by the program director to three classrooms of students. One of the classes completed the questionnaire at the end of the period; the other two completed the questionnaire at the beginning. In all cases, at both universities, the students returned the completed questionnaires to a folder so that no individual questionnaire would be connected with a specific person. After the administration of the student questionnaires was complete, the folder was collected, the questionnaires were numbered, and the data from each was entered into a spreadsheet.

2.5. Interviews

After the administration of the questionnaires, interviews were conducted with selected instructors and students, depending on their willingness to participate as indicated on the questionnaire. The interviews had a structured format, with questions focusing on exploring specific instances of cultural conflict in the classroom more thoroughly: "Have you ever experienced a conflict in the classroom that you think was related to culture? If you have experienced conflict in the classroom that you think was related to culture, tell me more about what happened. How did you feel? What did you do to resolve the situation, if anything?"

An invitation to participate in an interview was extended to all instructor respondents. Four instructors agreed to be interviewed, including three from Khalifa University and one from the American University of Sharjah. The three Khalifa University instructors' interviews were recorded and transcribed; the interview with

the American University of Sharjah instructor was carried out via email by the respondent's request, as she was away from campus on holiday at the time.

An invitation to participate in an interview was extended to all student respondents. Nine students agreed to be interviewed, including three from Khalifa University and six from the American University of Sharjah. The three Khalifa University students' interviews were conducted informally in a group setting in the lounge area at the university; since I am unknown to the students there, it was necessary to keep the atmosphere relaxed. The interviews with the American University of Sharjah students were carried out individually or in pairs in my office, and detailed notes were taken. These notes were visible to the students on a computer monitor as they spoke with me so that they could clarify any points or ask that parts of their responses be omitted if they preferred. Since the students considered me an authority figure, it was important to me that they felt they had some control over the resulting content of the interview session.

2.6. Data analysis

The questionnaires administered to instructors were sorted according to the instructor's status as a NES. Only data from the questionnaires completed by NES instructors was analyzed. Similarly, the questionnaires administered to students were sorted according to the student's nationality. Only data from the questionnaires completed by Arab students was analyzed. The instructors' and students' responses to the open-ended question were recorded and analyzed to discover any patterns that emerged in the results. In addition, the responses to the interview questions were analyzed to detect any recurring themes or opinions, and any anecdotes about cultural conflicts were categorized to group similar events together.

3. Results and discussion

The questionnaires asked instructors to share details of cultural conflicts they have experienced in their classrooms. This information was also collected during the interviews. Their responses have been categorized and are summarized in Table 3, with accompanying illustrative examples excerpted from the short answers and interviews. The categories are presented in descending order of the number of occurrences for each.

Table 3. Categories of cultural conflict in the classroom – instructors

Type of Conflict	#	Illustrative Example
Inappropriate material in class (films, books, texts, discussion topics)	16	"Certain books had pictures which were inappropriate for the culture here. I had to blank [them] out when making photocopies so students would not focus only on the picture."
Mixed-gender difficulties	6	"Introducing male and female Emirati[s]… to the concept of working together in groups where both genders are represented can be problematic."
Teacher too casual with students	5	"In another culture I would share some details of my life outside the classroom with students. I still do but I edit carefully what I say so as not to cause offence."
Dress and appearance	3	"Inappropriate dressing of peers and teachers."
Lack of respect for religious customs/events	3	"Insensitive approaches to religious customs/events i.e. Ramadhan."
Intrusion into family privacy	2	"When I first started teaching in the UAE…I asked male students to bring in photos of their siblings including sisters and couldn't understand why they didn't. I handled it badly by insisting, but they never did!"
Causing shame in front of the class	2	"A colleague came into my class…and noticed a student doing something a bit silly. He broke off the conversation and confronted the male student in front of his peers…The student lost face and therefore replied man-to-man aggressively. The incident escalated and took quite a bit of fixing."
Western teacher seen as "other"	2	"I think that students accept me less readily than they do an Arab/Muslim teacher. I think they see me as 'other' and when I ask them to do something they are not familiar with, I think they see that I am asking that as an 'other' and they don't trust me."

When asked on the questionnaire and in interviews about conflicts with their Western NES instructors, many students reported that they were experiencing cultural misunderstandings in the classroom. Their responses have been categorized and are summarized in Table 4, with accompanying illustrative examples excerpted from the short answers and interviews. The categories are presented in descending order of the number of occurrences for each.

Table 4. Categories of cultural conflict in the classroom – students

Type of Conflict	#	Illustrative Example
Lack of respect for religious customs/events	8	"Yes, they make [jokes] about having four wives in our religion!!"
Perceived unfairness on the part of the instructor	8	"Some teachers think they are right and the students are always wrong."
Mixed-gender difficulties	8	"He wanted to shake her hand but she doesn't want to. But he made her shake his hand. When he left, she said 'how could he do this?'"
Western teacher seen as "other"	3	"In my opinion she needs to understanding [sic] my culture."
Causing shame in front of the class	3	"Teacher announcing a low score in front of everyone. A high score is ok but not a low score!"
Inappropriate material in class (films, books, texts, discussion topics)	1	"One time I feel so strange because my teacher suppose knows my culture and my religion but she put a video in youtube is unrespect in our religion. It was only a music but the pictures was rude in our religion."
Dress and appearance	1	"Clothes, the way she/he talk, attitude."

What kinds of conflicts occur between native English-speaking instructors and Arab students in EFL classrooms in the UAE? It was discovered that both instructors and students are experiencing cultural conflicts in the classroom. Instructors gave details of cultural conflicts they had experienced in the classroom, and among the nine categories of cultural conflict that were identified in this research, instructors reported having the most trouble with inappropriate material in class (films, books, texts, discussion topics) and managing sensitive mixed-gender issues.

The mention of avoiding problems with inappropriate material in class was almost universal among the instructor research participants. One instructor explained it this way:

> I feel very sensitive to textbooks, videos, and audio materials which mention alcohol or Western relationships when there are Muslims in the class. I feel that there are so many other ways to explore language [that] I would rather use an alternative. I think I am sometimes more sensitive to the subject matter than the students are, but it makes me feel uncomfortable to think that the material may offend even one student in the class.

Another instructor agrees that:

> there's quite a lot of stuff I really do want to use…on YouTube, and TED Talks, and all of that kind of stuff, [but] it has to be so cleverly vetted because within any one group that you teach…there was always the one or two [students] you could see were uncomfortable. So again, as a resource to actually teach something, I don't use music. I just don't. And 70% of [the students] would probably love it, but I don't. It's just not worth it.

The other major area of cultural conflict in the classroom reported by instructors was managing mixed-gender issues. Instructors found it difficult to be appropriately sensitive to the fact that many of their students were in mixed-gender classes for the first time. Pair and group work issues between boys and girls were commonly reported by the instructors, who struggled to know when it was acceptable to place girls and boys together, and when it was best to leave an unspoken assumption of segregation alone. One instructor describes the situation in her classroom:

> [Y]ou've got the girls on the one side, the guys on the other, which I dislike intensely, but there you go. And I think many of them do as well, but again, who's going to break that one down? [It] is there to protect against murmuring rumors or whatever and that's fine. [At the Abu Dhabi campus of Khalifa University], they have them doing group work together. I have never gone there. I'm just not willing to do it. Because again, we're in the Northern Emirates. And the girl who says "yes," bless her little heart, is the one who's going to get talked about.

Many students also described cultural conflicts in the classroom. The three most frequent categories of concern for students (eight occurrences each) were a lack of respect on the part of the teacher toward religious customs/events, perceived

unfairness on the part of the teacher (a category not represented in instructor responses), and sensitive mixed-gender issues.

The instructors' lack of respect for religious customs/events, as reported by students, most often took the form of negative statements about Islam or the Islamic traditions of particular countries (mostly Saudi Arabia). Students reported Western NES instructors making fun of Islam because of its provision for multiple wives, or ridiculing the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia, or saying that Islam is an extremely prohibitive religion.

Conflicts described by the students that were allocated to other categories, such as the example from mixed-gender issues, below, also have relevance in this category. Student A at Khalifa University reported that her instructor

> asked students to put mobile phones away. One student put her mobile phone in a side pocket of her purse. The instructor (male) came over and unzipped her purse. She was very shocked that he would do that. He then started to look through it a little, looking for the phone. She said no, she can do that herself, and she put her phone inside. Later, she heard that people were saying she had slapped his hand away, which embarrassed her since females should not touch males in this way.

Student M at Khalifa University talked about how one instructor at her school

> is known for saying "ladies first;" sometimes "ladies first: if you are gentlemen (or men) you will let them go first." Some of the boys [get angry] at that because they feel he is saying they are not men, or he is questioning their manhood. As a result, the girls get first choice of topics, etc. and the boys sometimes resent it. [It is a big deal] to question someone's manhood.

These incidents are interesting because they are examples of a disconnection between the Western NES idea of what is acceptable to their students in the classroom, and the Muslim Arab reality. Each of these incidents would probably not have been worthy of mention if it had taken place in the US or UK. If a male teacher going through a female student's purse were mentioned, it would be because it was an invasion of privacy in general, not because of the genders of the people involved or because the girl student supposedly slapped the male teacher's hand away. These two incidents are occasions where Western NES instructors may not even be aware that they have caused cultural offense.

The second-most cited area of cultural conflict for students was perceived unfairness on the part of teachers. In this case, it is impossible to determine to what extent this unfairness (as it was reported by the students) actually stems from cultural differences between the instructor and student. In some cases, it is possible that the difference in culture is contributing to the conflict, as in a situation described by a female student (Student K) at Khalifa University during her interview:

> I submitted a first draft of an essay and received comments and changes. Then I submitted a second draft and received even more comments and changes! This was a

surprise to me since I expected fewer changes the second time. I felt like the teacher didn't like me personally.

This teacher seems to have been giving feedback in the Western style, without regard to the expectations of this student from another culture, in which feedback may not take the same form. Instances of this kind of cultural conflict were described in Al-Issa (2005).

In other cases, however, it may be that given a chance to describe a conflict in class, some students chose to describe any conflict, rather than only those that were spurred on by cultural difference. One such example may be the following, as related by a Saudi student (Student F) at AUS:

Yes, in my last semester I really worked hard and there were some people who didn't work as much as me but I had some issues which makes me absent for some classes and at the end I failed my course.

It is not immediately apparent that this conflict was due to overt cultural differences. It is possible that this is an example of a disconnect between students' and instructors' cultural expectations regarding acceptable reasons for class absences.

The third-most cited area of cultural conflict for students was mixed-gender issues. Students reported incidents of hand-shaking and other casual touch between the sexes that made them uncomfortable. In an interview, Student B told about "another situation like maybe the teacher, he's not flirting, but he's saying really nice words to a female student that she's embarrassed." Hand-shaking, casual touches on the shoulder, and the praising of a female student by a male instructor are incidents that would probably not cause problems in a Western classroom, and Western NES instructors may not have thought twice before doing those things in a UAE classroom. However, this category of cultural conflict was a major one for both instructors and students, which shows that it is an area that is especially difficult to manage for both sides.

It is interesting to note that students reported almost no incidents of inappropriate material in class. This is in contrast to the instructors, for whom this was the most frequent category of cultural conflicts. One instructor explained it this way in her interview:

You want to have a debate in the classroom and discuss things more, you feel that maybe the locals are more worldly-wise than actually they are, and prepared to debate and talk about maybe more controversial areas…[T]he students are all progressing, though, they've moved on a lot more…especially with social media and they are more worldly-wise and are exposed to the Western culture full-on, not in the little bits as they were in the past. So they're well aware, but we still try and avoid it in the classroom.

Another adds that

there are certain teachers that can push the envelope more than others and get away with it. But I would always say then if anyone asked me, I would always veer on the conservative side.

The fact that the Western NES instructors seem to be hyper-aware of avoiding the introduction of inappropriate content into the classroom appears to be borne out by the fact that students are not encountering enough of this kind of conflict in the classroom to mention it in the questionnaire or interview.

One anecdote shared during a student interview illustrates the cultural give-and-take that is going on in the classroom. Student S spoke at length about a classroom activity that at first alarmed him as being outside the proper bounds of his culture, but that he later learned to appreciate in his own way (his words have been edited slightly for clarity):

Last semester, when there were one or two weeks left, [my teacher] wanted to do some exciting experience. She told us she would write our names on papers, and we would choose the papers and give that person a gift [Secret Santa exchange]. This was the first time doing this for all of us in the class.

I chose a girl name. So I was like, "Oh my gosh! What should I do?" So I asked my friends, "What should I give to her?" They told me to give her flowers or something like that. But I thought maybe I wanted to give her a mug. But I said, "I don't know anything about girls!"

I waited until the last day to prepare something. I woke up at ten, went to the supermarket, and bought some flowers and chocolates to give to the girl in class. It was a new experience. It was positive, in the end. It was my first time buying a gift for a girl!

[Interviewer]: What if you told your parents about that activity?

[Student S]: I did tell them. I said it was like a homework assignment. I told my mother I brought flowers to a girl and she said, "What???" But I explained to her that I don't really know the girl and I brought it like a gift because I had to.

The experience of this Palestinian student illustrates a cultural conflict averted. The Western NES instructor's idea for a Secret Santa activity was possibly ill-advised, seemingly flouting several aspects of Muslim culture and tradition, namely that it is associated with a Christian holiday, and it requires gift-giving between the sexes. It certainly does not appear to have been implemented with Kramsch's (1993) advice in mind, to "take into consideration differences in class, gender, race, and ethnicity in the design of classroom activities" (p. 49). However, students like S took the activity, made it a learning experience, and were all the happier for it.

It is possible that other students in the same class, or other students another time in another class, could be offended at such an activity, and a serious cultural conflict could arise. Student S himself appends at the end of his account that "it would be more awkward for a girl to give to a boy," allowing for the possibility of his positive experience having been a very negative one for some of his classmates. Indeed, data collected from the instructors and students in this study, including those summarized

in Tables 3 and 4, show plenty of similar instances of cultural conflict that did not turn out so well. But Student S's way of dealing with an unfamiliar cultural experience in class brings to mind the words of one instructor when she explained that her students are

> curious about the world. So they wouldn't have thanked me if I had diluted the content. That wasn't why they were there. They wouldn't have thanked me if I didn't match them up with other nationalities to do pair work, [etc.]. That was all part of what they signed up for. So you can be overly sensitive and actually end up not doing much good either!

4. Conclusions

This research focused on cultural conflicts between Western, native English-speaking instructors and their Arab students at two university-level EFL programs in the UAE. Questionnaires and interviews were used to discover the details of specific classroom cultural conflicts. Nine categories of classroom cultural conflicts were identified. For instructors, the major concerns were inappropriate materials/discussion topics in class, and problems managing boy/girl interactions sensitively. Students also reported problems with these mixed-gender issues, as well as a lack of respect for religious customs on the part of instructors.

Western NES instructors in the UAE EFL context should realize that while student attitudes toward foreign cultures are changing to be more inclusive, certain core values, such as the importance of religion in one's daily life, remain strong and should not be challenged in the classroom. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) compare this phenomenon to an onion: the outer layers may start looking the same in two very different cultures, but the inner layers remain as different as they ever were (p. 20). Western NES instructors should continue to be vigilant about ensuring that the classroom remains free of materials that may be offensive (outer layers of the onion) as they work toward cultivating a genuine, overall respect for religious customs and traditions (inner layers of the onion). Minding the more important, more crucial differences that lead to cultural conflict will probably take care of the more superficial problem areas.

A particular area of Muslim religious customs and traditions that should be focused on, according to this research, is managing sensitive gender issues in class. Instructors who are unsure of cultural norms regarding group/pair work, seating arrangements, appropriate physical contact, and other behavior between the sexes should seek out a knowledgeable source for advice.

4.1. Limitations

The findings of this research apply best to the context of Western NES instructors teaching in EFL classrooms in the UAE, where the students are mostly Muslim Arabs. Its findings could also be applied to other countries in the Gulf region, such as

Qatar, Oman, etc., and possibly to Arab countries outside the GCC, such as Jordan and Egypt. However, the findings of this study are unlikely to have relevant, specific implications for EFL programs outside these areas, though its general conclusions can be taken into consideration wherever there are cultural differences between instructors and students in the classroom.

In addition, the scale of this research was relatively small, especially regarding the number of instructors who agreed to participate. This was due to the timing of the administration of the research instruments, occurring, as it did, at the very end of the spring semester and extending into the summer, when many instructors go on leave for the duration. Future studies should seek to incorporate the opinions of more instructors.

One consequence of having only a medium-sized group of instructors as participants is that almost all of the instructors were very experienced. As a result, this research did not yield much data from inexperienced instructors.

4.2. Suggestions for further research

In order to address some of the limitations of this research, future studies could seek to expand the scope of the instructors, students, and universities involved in this study. Additional studies could also expand the student participant pool to include more segments of UAE society such as non-Arab Muslims, non-Muslim Arabs, and other non-Western nationalities.

4.3. Concluding remarks

This research has shown the significant presence culture and cultural conflicts have in EFL classrooms in the UAE. Day in and day out, Western NES instructors and their Arab students are navigating the issues raised by cultural differences. In fact, rather than cultural differences in the classroom being peripheral to the learning that is going on, it could be that the cultural dialogue is the education. When Western NES instructors and their Arab students "engage with difference," together, in ways that contribute to the building up of cultural understanding, this education can proceed without impediment, to the enrichment of all (Young & Sachdev, 2011, p. 90).

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Appendix A. Complete list of student respondents

Student #	M/F	Nationality	Native Language	Religion	University
1	F	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
2	F	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
3	F	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
4	F	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
5	F	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
6	F	Emarati	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
7	F	Emirati	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
8	F	Emaraty	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
9	F	Emirati	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
10	F	Emirati	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
11	F	Emirati	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
12	F	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
13	M	Emirati	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
14	M	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
15	M	Emarati	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
16	M	Emirates	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
17	M	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
18	M	Emirati	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
19	M	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
20	F	Emarati	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
21	F	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	Khalifa University
22	M	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
23	M	Emarati	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
24	M	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
25	M	Jordan	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
26	M	China	Chinese	Other	AUS
27	M	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
28	M	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
29	F	Emirati	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
30	F	China	Uyghur	Muslim	AUS
31	M	Yemeni	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
32	M	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
33	F	Syrian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
34	F	KSA	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
35	F	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
36	M	Sudan	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
37	F	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
38	M	Jordanian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
39	F	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
40	M	Local	Arabic	Muslim	AUS

41	F	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
42	F	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
43	M	Emirati	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
44	F	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
45	M	Emarati	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
46	F	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
47	F	Emirati	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
48	M	Palestinian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
49	M	Kuwaiti	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
50	M	Palestinian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
51	F	Jordanian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
52	M	Jordanian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
53	M	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
54	M	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
55	M	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
56	F	Egyptian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
57	M	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
58	M	Emirati	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
59	F	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
60	M	Emirati	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
61	F	Palestinian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
62	M	UAE	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
63	F	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
64	F	Emarati	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
65	M	Libyan	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
66	M	Syrian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
67	M	Palestinian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
68	M	Chechen	Chechen	Muslim	AUS
69	M	Russia	Russian, Tatar	Muslim	AUS
70	F	Egyptian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
71	M	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
72	M	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
73	M	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
74	M	Saudi	Arabic	Muslim	AUS
75	F	Jordanian	Arabic	Muslim	AUS

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