The familiar & strange 'Other' – A Portfolio Assessment of Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

This study examines the (inter-)cultural experiences of female undergraduates attending a government-funded university in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates. The study examines written narrative data gathered from a sample of female Arabic-speaking students enrolled in the Colloquy Program at Zayed University (ZU). It reports important findings arrived at on the basis of deciphering written portfolios. Here, student written scripts are taken as mirrors of the socio-cultural world which shapes the participants' cultural awareness (CA) and intercultural competence (IC), in a context of English as a Second Language (ESL). In general, the findings revealed two broad types of feelings vis-à-vis 'others' who are sometimes perceived as 'familiar' and sometimes as 'strange'. The findings should be of interest to teachers of English as second/foreign language and to academics studying (inter)cultural issues.

Keywords: ESL, portfolios, intercultural competence, identity, otherness.

Introduction

The global reality – rife as it is with severe grievances and agonies in these troubled times – is such that there is an unprecedented urgency to deepen and broaden dialogue among civilizations, and to create change for a better future. In a world marked by social, political, and cultural tensions, there is a particular need to eradicate prejudice and stereotyping. An honest pledge to promote dialogue among cultures is in order; this requires a strong value that unites our common humanity while asserting local and individual identities. Language education can play a crucial role in bringing about much needed changes. Modern technologies, globalization, widespread migrations and multiculturalism constitute important factors that expedite the need for developing and promoting IC.

Intercultural Competence

The cultural component in the EFL/ESL classroom is now firmly and widely recognized in research by Kramsch (1993), Byram (1997), Fantini (2006), and others. Culture is no longer treated as a separate strand in teaching English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL). Furthermore, the invaluable and vital gains of teaching culture in the language classroom are substantially well-documented. Paige et al., (2000), for example, offer an excellent review of the literature pertaining to culture learning in language education programs. Recently, increasing awareness of the crucial role of the cultural dimension in EFL/ESL education has led to further developments which have culminated in the emergence of a recognizably important component in the field - namely IC.

Following Fantini (2006), IC involves "a complex of abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (p. 12) [emphasis in original]. It involves the ability to explore and interrogate different cultures and decipher relationships between them. As Byram (2000) suggests, it is the ability "to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people". Therefore as Byram goes on to conclude, an interculturally competent person should have "a critical or analytical understanding of (parts of) their own and other cultures - someone who is conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their understanding and perspective is natural."

Developing IC within the context of EFL/ESL involves more than merely acquiring communicative competence in that language. As is now widely acknowledged, command of a foreign language is not the sine qua non of intercultural competence. IC requires acquiring specific skills, attitudes, values, knowledge items and ways of viewing the world as well as learning "new foundations for reception of information, but new foundations for interpretation, judgment, and understanding of that information and, thus, their lives." (Serçu, 2002, p. 63). IC starts with the ability to describe and analyze one's culture and then grows into developing an awareness of how culture impacts one's and others' attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. It also encompasses the ability to decipher how perceptions of difference promote or impede social interactions. IC calls for the skills that help in conflict resolution, decision making, and participation in social action (Meltzoff and Lenssen, 2000).

With the increasing emphasis on the intercultural dimension of foreign and second language education, the language learner is now viewed as an 'intercultural speaker', someone who

"crosses frontiers, and who is to some extent a specialist in the transit of cultural property and symbolic values" (Byram and Zarate, 1997, p. 11). A consequence of this development is that the goals of IC in language education encompass the need to improve linguistic proficiency, acquire factual and cultural knowledge, enhance acculturation, and mediate between different cultures (Corbett, 2007).

Assessing Intercultural Competence

A major difficulty characterizing culture instruction is the adoption of a model of IC based on the native speaker benchmark, usually embodied by American or British English speakers. With the 'Triumph of English' (The Economist, 2001) as the language of international business, communication, diplomacy, science, technology, etc., English is now viewed as an international language (EIL) (Sharifian, 2009) rather than a foreign or second language. Therefore, the term 'native speaker' model, which has for long enjoyed the luxury of providing a standard for optimal performance, has of late come under vehement attack (Cook, 1995).

For Kachru and Nelson (1996, p. 81), the term qualifies as "casual labeling, which used to be so comfortably available as a demarcation line between this and that type or group of users of English must now be called into serious question." Medgryes (1996) corroborates a similar view and notes that it is very difficult to define who is and who is not a native speaker in today's international society. Therefore, foreign/second learners should be treated just as learners in their own right, rather than emulating the native speaker norm. One can only be a native speaker of one's own language and a member of one's own culture. Kramsch (1998, p. 79) points out that "the identity as well as the authority of the native speaker have been put into question."

As learners stand to gain from their intercultural experiences, we have to recognize that learning involves the process of exploration and the students' autonomous, personal construction of meaning. Therefore, we must allow for diverse pathways to and demonstrations of knowledge, attitudes, and understanding, which are all crucial to developing and fostering IC. With the recent developments made in teaching English as a foreign/second language, a central issue for EFL/ ESL researchers, teachers and learners alike concerns the issue of measuring IC. Born out of the recognition that if we truly value student growth and understanding of cultural knowledge, then we must find ways to assess this knowledge and understanding, there is a pressing need to resist the temptation to treat cultural knowledge merely as the only vehicle for facilitating learning about others; attitudes and behavior are essential channels for facilitating and empowering such learning, too.

Given the multi-faceted and complex nature of IC, as a composite of skills and knowledge, developing the different aspects of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness is "a longitudinal and on-going process" and, as such, triangulating diverse and multiple "benchmarks may be helpful to mark one's journey along the way." (Fantini, 2001, p. 2). Assessing knowledge is but a small part of what must be measured, and assessment should also encompass the ability of learners to "step outside, to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, and to act on that change of perspective." (Byram, 2000).

To operationalize participants' intercultural practices, the present research used portfolio assessment, which is a useful means of maintaining an ongoing record of student learning. Portfolios also facilitate reflection on the learning experience, retrospectively and prospectively.

Unlike traditional forms of assessment that aim to quantify learning, portfolios serve as templates for evaluating students' awareness of events occurring in their life experiences (Schulz, 2007). As such they are ideal repositories of qualitative data for discourse analysts, ethnographers and action researchers..

The study

This study explored the (inter-)cultural experiences of undergraduate students at Zayed University (ZU), Dubai, the United Arab Emirates. The research presented here was conducted at ZU and employed narrative portfolio assessment as a means of documenting students' reflections on their experience of (inter)cultural learning. Drawing on portfolio narratives from a sample of female students, it reports findings from student written scripts. Student narratives are taken as mirrors of the socio-cultural world that shapes the participants' IC, in an ESL context.

This study involved undergraduate female students at ZU, a federal university for women established in 1998 in the Arab Gulf State of the UAE. Zayed University has two campuses, one in Dubai and another in the capital Abu Dhabi, and is led by a single administration. It prides itself on using new, state-of-the-art facilities and technology. The students gain an international experience through a blend of a western model of education, global issues courses across the curriculum, exposure to faculty from more than 30 different countries, clubs which focus on cultural issues, partnerships with various western universities from around the world, student exchange opportunities, high profile guest speakers, and international conferences.

The mission espoused by ZU emphasizes fostering student understanding of their relation to the world. The stated learning outcomes are geared toward developing students' ability to "think critically about the relationship between local contexts and global forces through a comparative engagement with the world, its histories, its problems, and its successes." (The Zayed University Catalog 2007-2008, p. 33). Within an interdisciplinary focus that supports the ZU Learning Outcomes, the learning goals include Global Awareness, Critical Thinking, Computer Applications, Information Literacy, English, and Arabic. Of these, Global Awareness implicitly refers to learning about "other societies and other cultures" and stipulates that students will be able to conceptualize the influence of "global forces on their local contexts while at the same time being able to acknowledge, appreciate, and understand the artistic, cultural, and political values and beliefs of others." (ibid.).

ZU aspires to become the leading university in the region, adhering to the same rigorous standards and intellectual criteria deeply seated in prominent universities worldwide. During their first two-year phase at ZU, students experience arduous standards in the Colloquy program, a program similar to the two-year general education programs followed in North American universities. The five core courses that constitute the Colloquy Program – Global Awareness I (Global Studies I), Global Awareness II (World Humanities), Global Awareness III (Global Studies II), Islamic Studies I and Islamic Studies II – all underscore the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge and the contributions of the various disciplines over time and from different parts of the globe. All university students enroll in the Colloquy Program and during each of the first three semesters of their baccalaureate program they enroll in these courses. The Global Awareness courses are offered as a sequence during the first three semesters of the first two years of university education.

The focus of Global Awareness I is 'emerging civilizations' where students examine some ancient civilizations, including the Greek, Roman, Mogul, and the Persian empires). Global Awareness II explores 'Imperial encounters' and concentrates on the encounters between the Aztecs and the Spanish, between African empires (Congo, Ghana, Mali, Songhai); and the Europeans, and between the Ottoman Empire and neighboring rivals (Mongols, Safavids, Byzantines). This course also explores the British Empire and its Indian colony. In Global Awareness III, emphasis is placed on 'The 20th century and globalization' and students probe topics such as the collapse of empires, state and society in Europe, contemporary world history and society, the first and second world wars, the reasons and effects related to each, and the cold war era. The courses are taught by faculty with diverse national and educational backgrounds. The students taking these courses are required to take an objective examination that tests students' acquaintance with a body of knowledge acquired during the study of a particular civilization, encounter, or event. In addition, students take a critical thinking essay examination. During the course of the semester, they are also required to complete two in-class writing assignments. Class projects, discussions, presentations, and other activities are left to the instructor's discretion.

In addition to exposure to multi-national faculty currently teaching at ZU, undergraduate students are exposed to a western model of education and across-the-curriculum courses that deal with global issues. The students often also have guest and visiting professors from prestigious partner institutions in the West. Moreover, international academic, scientific, and medical influences have a strong presence in the country and many top-notch Western higher education institutions have launched programs in different parts of the UAE. Beyond the university campus environment, a wide range of English language media is on offer. Satellite TV channels, such as BBC World, BBC Prime, CNN, Fox news, Sky News, etc. are all at one's finger tips. A local cable network, e-vision, and other English-speaking channels, including Dubai TV, MBC2, City 7 TV, etc. are all at hand. Moreover, major English-speaking newspapers from the UK, the US, and Australia are available on a daily basis. Local English-speaking newspapers include Gulf News, Khaleej Times, The National, etc. The UAE as a whole is a country with one of the highest rates of diversity in the world, with more than 200 foreign nationalities living in the country (Matthew, 2008). In brief, many students experience some kind of interaction with people who appear culturally different from themselves.

Methodology

The study's overarching research questions were formulated as follows:

- Do the three Global Awareness courses assist students in developing their IC (especially in terms of knowledge, understanding, and empathy) and hence effect change in their perceptions of 'otherness'?
- What are the implications of these courses for students' own identity when confronted with that of the 'others', i.e. English-speaking people?

To decipher how written narratives convey underlying opinions expressed by the student participants, this study utilized student portfolios. The written scripts embody stances that privilege the individual subjectivity of the students. Studying the students' perspectives opens the way to a broader comprehension of the ideas, moods, passions, and motivations

expressed in the written scripts; it also offers insights into the contents of the inner life of the individual writers. The view espoused here is that ardent attention to the outside of things risks ignoring the deeper soul of things that often lies beneath. Therefore, texts – viewed here as the flesh and blood of a culture – are examined as functional and intentionally crafted language, and as cultural sites of values and ideologies (Anstey and Bull, 2000).

The use of the portfolio was examined in the context of anonymity, methodological rigor, and robust qualitative data. The fact that the students wrote solicited narratives within the context of an assessment event also needs to be acknowledged. Three courses constituted the focus of this study: Global Awareness I, II and III. Students taking these courses were required to submit a written portfolio, as part of their overall assessment. The aim of student portfolios was to investigate different topics for the purpose of furnishing an opinion on controversial aspects of a topic and creating an argument that supports that opinion. The students were required to articulate arguments that rest solidly on wide-ranging research and that culminate in an essay; they were asked to examine certain topics within the context of their own society, in comparison to the Western societies they were most acquainted with. The topics covered religion, women, government, education, freedom, daily life in their own society and western society.

Each student submits a compilation of representative course materials, including the course syllabi and course descriptions (with details of content, objectives, methods, and assessment procedures), written assignments, exams and quizzes, handouts, lecture notes, reading logs, and reflection narratives, including a summary of what had been learned from the course. These components were put together as a portfolio displaying illustrative samples of students' written work. Using portfolio data in the present research is a useful way of tapping students' cognitive (knowledge) and affective (attitudes) facets of intercultural competence. This aids in exploring their involvement in the 'conscious pursuits of meaning' (Greene, 1995, p. 176) which in turn helps to unravel the meanings underlying the individual voices of the student participants.

Portfolios bring together authentic examples of student work, framed by narrative descriptive, interpretation, and reflection. The narratives were analyzed for content and recurring themes that capture student perceptions, feelings, values, and beliefs. The themes identified in this research are viewed as cultural sites where socio-cultural aspects of students' written texts unfold. As such, they delineate the positions and viewpoints of the student participants and thus encompass the attitudes, values and beliefs of a community. Two culturally-oriented goals were identified: Knowledge (the ability to recognize cultural information) and understanding (the ability to explain cultural information). Therefore, the aim of this research was to probe students' knowledge (what the students *knew*) and opinions and viewpoints (what they *thought*). The aim was to decipher how student written narratives demonstrated the depth and breadth of the writers' views and opinions. Although none of the written material was treated as data until the course was completed, it needs to be admitted that this might impact the students' discourse practices. However, this does not necessarily mitigate the sincerity of the opinions expressed in their written scripts. Using loose portfolio data, even when triangulated with a second set, can be fraught with hazards related to subjectivity and may fall prey to reductionism or other fallacies

caused by over-reliance on self-reported data. A stronger ethnographic approach would need to comprise observational data.

The sample

Data for the study was collected from a sample of 35 female students; all were national women taking Colloquy courses. The students were informed that some of their portfolios would be used for research purposes and were asked to express their consent or dissent regarding the use of their portfolios for the research. Accordingly, in this study only the portfolios compiled by the students who expressed consent were used. In undertaking this task, three colleagues teaching the Global Awareness courses helped in doing the same in their respective classes in collecting their students' portfolios. Furthermore, the students were assured the use of the portfolio data had nothing to do with their performance in class. The student age range was from 18 to 24 with a mean of 21. The participants who partook in and wrote reflective narratives of their own exposure to and experience of the target culture agreed for their reflective journals to be used for this research. For purposes of confidentiality, the names of the portfolio writers are not revealed in this paper.

Mode of analysis

Drawing on grounded theory tradition, this study underscores symbols and meanings and seeks to decipher students' experiences of the 'other' culture. The analysis, which is of an interpretive nature, focuses on student written discourse measured against the backdrop of the socio-cultural processes that impact upon language practice and linguistic selection. It examines discourse as language in use, i.e. language situated in context. In trying to explore evaluative language, the study sets out to identify a mode of evaluative positioning, i.e. the attitudinal in students' statements which convey positive or negative assessments. Themes – the chief units constructed from the data analysis – are viewed as platforms for investigating lived experiences and function like "knots in the webs of our experiences [and] the stars that make up the universe of meaning we live through." (Manen, 1990, p. 90).

The approach adopted in this study views 'text' as an iceberg of information, whereby only the tip is manifestly expressed in words, phrases and sentences. It is assumed that the covert rest is supplied by the structures implicitly underlying the written scripts. Accordingly, analyzing the 'implicit' in student written scripts sanctions the study of underlying misconceptions and ideologies. Language and meaning are treated here as social constructs, and texts are therefore considered functional and intentionally crafted language and as transmitters of values and ideologies, i.e. as cultural sites (Anstey and Bull, 2000, p. 186).

Analysis and discussion of the findings

The view espoused in analyzing the portfolio data is that students' written scripts need to be regarded as functional and intentionally crafted language. Drawing on the relationship between discourse and culture, texts can be read to reveal cultural information. In effect, through texts it is possible to gain access to worldviews, values and ideologies (Callow, 1999, p. 2). Hence, studying student discourse to unravel traits of 'otherness' helps to reveal how one society projects a set of characterizations onto a confronted unfamiliar culture. As Scarino (2000) contends, considering that viewpoints are culturally conditioned, students engage with otherness.

In this research, the discourse configurations in students' written narratives are regarded as sites of identity construction and hence the production of binary oppositions. Each participant is viewed as "a complex social being, whose identity is produced within and through language" (Pomerantz, 2001).

This study is situated in the nexus and intersection of identity dynamics whereby socio-cultural learning is located within the domain of the complex identity relationships of the students. The analysis below positions identity formation within a dynamic, relational, and multi-faceted context of interlocking relationships involving lived experience, discursive portrayals and ways of knowing. Identity is viewed here as a (relational) social and cultural construct par excellence, for our identities stem from our sense of belonging to distinctive national, religious, cultural, ethnic, and racial cultures. The construction of identity involves the formation – and transformation – of an opposite 'other' whose existence is subject to our interpretation of how different 'They' are from 'Us'. The formation of an 'Us'–'Them' polarized duality delineates the identity of the 'other' and of the 'Self' and leads to establishing opposites and 'others.' Accordingly, this study explores instances of identity formation and negotiation through the voices and perspectives expressed in the portfolio narratives viewed here as 'conscious pursuits of meaning' (Greene, 1995: 176). It examines the ways in which adversarial identities are socially constructed according to notions of difference which yield a comparison to, and sometimes a confrontation and rejection of, others. Students' written narratives yielded depictions that are essentially framed by historical, social, and political events and, more importantly, by the media, in addition to the ethnocentric predispositions, negative or otherwise, which many displayed.

Cultural identities and perceptions of 'Otherness'

A common thread that runs through participants' written scripts demonstrates a dichotomized division of others into circles of 'Us' and 'Them'. The results from the data analysis yielded dual categorizations of 'We/Us' and 'They/Them' that are of a predominantly ethnocentric nature. The 'Us' (self) dimension embodies a sense of belonging to an *inner circle* of positioning and reflects a relationship of closeness and inclusion whereas its 'Them' (other) counterpart characterizes an *outer circle* of positioning that involves a relationship of distance and exclusion. It is one's identity, firmly anchored in one's native culture, which identifies similarity and convergence or difference and divergence. Because we negotiate our identities with people who are similar to or different from us, our identities are constantly subject to change; they develop and are transformed in and through processes of social interaction which always take place in particular contexts characterized by power relationships and power struggles. Holliday (1999) speaks of the "fluid, amorphous, constantly in flux phenomena that represent the cultural" (p. 238).

Overall, the written scripts demonstrated two essentially broad and divergent sets of 'otherizing,' hence exhibiting two rather distinct forms of otherness. As Papadopoulos suggests, the results revealed a distinction between two different kinds of 'others': a distant, *'foreign'* or *'strange'* other and a somewhat close, *'familiar'* other. Of these polarized 'others' identified in the data narratives, the first relates to the *distant*, *foreign* 'other', a rather negative attitude that typically devalues these strange and foreign others. It entails an exclusive distribution of the *outsider* – an

'adversary other'– and hence typifies exclusion and rejection of those who happen to be different from 'Us'.

The written scripts, for example, characterize '*Their'* culture' as being s "very different from *ours* in many different ways" because "A lot of the things *they* do seem very strange and hard to understand." The student reports pointed to a trend whereby 'They' are depicted as "so different from *us*." Because there is a distinct 'other' being addressed – the West in this case – the written narratives yielded accounts that position 'them' as distant and 'very unfamiliar'. Whereas these perceptions might be viewed as another glimpse into the suspicion, fear or even resentment harbored by some against Westerners and their culture – an example of the toxic antipathy that dominates parts of the Arab Street – they may also be dismissed as misunderstandings of the misinformed.

Religious fervor remains one chief driving force behind the views expressed in the accounts and religious zeal could have breathed life into much of the claims made in the narratives. One's religious belief systems provide a framework for understanding the beliefs of others and as a lens through which '*They'* are portrayed as 'secular' because "*they* do not take much interest in *their* religion." Student accounts value judgments showing that religious belief systems play an important role in how one deals with those for whom "religion is not an important matter in their lives." Often, these others are considered 'atheists' who lead a life void of "important religious values that are essential in life." Moreover, while recognizing that Islam and Christianity share certain common beliefs, claims that "it is not easy for Muslims and Christians to live together" are not uncommon.

The written scripts also appear to conceal fears of a confrontation between students' Arab-Islamic cultural identity and Western (Anglophone) culture. A tendency for Anti-Western attitudes, embodied as a reaction against American cultural and economic dominance, is rampant in many Arab societies. This tendency which sometimes takes the form of cultural nationalism and protectionism and religious revival in Islamic countries impacts greatly on various aspects of daily life, including education, food habits, dressing styles, etc. Islam in the Islamic world is normally viewed as a way of life and pervades all aspects of Muslims' daily lives, and not simply a faith.

The misperceptions about 'Them' tend to be informed more often by stereotypes than by facts or firsthand knowledge since such depictions of 'Them' appear to be generated based on what 'We' do, and 'Our' lifestyle, norms, traditions, and mindsets. In the absence of informed, conscious awareness of how another culture differs from their own one's own, there is an inclination to see others through the lenses of one's own culture. Ignoring or misunderstanding the standards of others and failing to see other points of view than our own and other beliefs than those we have been taught to cherish, there is a risk of setting one's own so high, as if ordained by nature, and identifying oneself along the lines of religious 'selfness'. The result is ethnocentric evaluation and cultural differences become subjective and negative, not objective and neutral.

The West is also blamed for many of the woes that cripple most of the Arab world. Protests against Western policies have proliferated in the wake of 9/11 and the plight of the Palestinians in particular. Western powers are often described unfavorably as 'aggressive', 'unfriendly,' 'biased,' and 'hostile'. Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia are quoted as places where "you get the same terrible thing: war, crimes against humanity, and ruin." Some of the comments that

emerged from the narratives depict the West as "all the time trying to monopolize *our* countries in the name of freedom and democracy." As is evident in the student accounts, the reason lying behind "the damage *they* inflicted on our countries" is the rich natural resources that are plentiful in the region.

It is true, however, that widespread anti-Western sentiments (primarily anti-American) mood in the region is undeniably prompted by partial mass media rather than state policy. The post-2001 US pre-emptive war in Iraq and Afghanistan, backed by Britain, has triggered a significant rise in prejudice, anger, and even resentment among embittered, suspicious masses in Arab and Islamic countries. Strong feelings of anti-Americanism seems to have taken root in the Arab world since the start of the *Intifada* (uprising) in September 2000. This has made worse the smoldering Arab resentment of the US because of its uncritical, inexorable support of Israel. Arabs are especially angered by America's unwavering diplomatic, military and financial support of Israel in a prolonged occupation that suffocates the Palestinians' yearning for liberation.

Support for repressive Arab dictatorships, military bases on Arab soil, and an oil revenue which continually makes its way westwards are all factors that produce considerable popular anti-American sentiments, not to mention the long history of American military interventions in the region. In such a favorable climate, anti-Western violence and resentment flourish. Regardless of their political orientation, many Arabs have come to regard America as a source of evil and most of the political ills and misfortunes that have befallen the Arab/ Muslim world in the last few decades. The scripts yielded characterizations that portrayed 'Them' as belonging to a modern-age colonial power, demonstrating what appears to be an imperialist type of otherness which reduces the other to sheer rejection and refusal. As one student put it, "America is the great Satan. Very simply, it's all because of their imperialistic goals. All it takes is to look at the kind of freedom and democracy they brought to Iraq and Afghanistan."

The students' construction of dichotomized identities accentuate perceived cultural differences between 'Us' and 'Them' which play an important role in shaping how 'strange' or 'foreign' others are identified and responded to. The construction and maintenance of these identities not only has a tendency to homogenize populations, but also creates antagonistic and conflict-oriented relationships. Caution needs to be taken not to delineate culture along national parameters, for as Guest (2002) notes, identifying national characteristics when comparing and contrasting cultures often leads to an oversimplification that overlooks the individual, idiosyncratic and diverse range of equally important subcultures of which every individual is a member.

Beyond the panoptic chasm manifest in the pitting 'Us' against 'Them' dichotomization identified in the scripts, sympathetic attitudes and tolerant, welcoming views of these others were also communicated. The narratives revealed portrayals of a '*familiar*' other, depicted in fairly positive terms, thus allowing some space for accepting these not-so-strange others. This involves a '*different*' otherness allowing the other to enter into a sphere of acceptance that emerged in depictions provided by some students. It is this sphere of common ground that grants in-group membership to 'Them' – the 'benign other' – and allows 'Them' to be familiar to 'Us'. Despite the widespread Anti-Western (specifically anti-American) feelings prevalent in some reports, other accounts disclosed admiration of much of what the West has to offer to the rest of world.

The US (and Britain) were viewed as the best representatives of what is most admired about the West. 'Democracy', 'freedom of speech', 'technological inventions' and 'scientific progress' are examples of popular themes that emerged from the data narratives.

The written narratives also reveal instances of valorization of otherness. It is possible to be Arab/Muslim and not necessarily at odds, but at ease, with these (Western) 'others'. The positive attitudes towards 'them' which came out of the written accounts are, for the most part, receptive: "Many of them come to our country looking for jobs and they end up living over here. They're friendly and nice people." Interestingly, a distinction is drawn between Western governments and the masses they represent, a point the following statement captures: "It is true that their governments are always trying to monopolize our resources but it is also true that their people are very different." Acceptance and tolerance of 'others' illustrate empathetic attitudes towards these others:

- "People from so many different countries live in peace here in the UAE. There are Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus and so on"
- "Although some people claim that they may be a real danger to our culture and society in terms of our culture, religion, customs, lifestyles, etc., I don't think this is necessarily true. I can't deny that there are differences between their way of doing things and ours, but these differences we also find in our own society and culture."

Tolerance means acceptance, allowance, and permission of the other and of diversity. Related to tolerance is co-existence, the basic tenets of which accentuate the worth of the 'Other' and valorization of diversity. This entails recognizing difference, embracing diversity, and a commitment to tolerance. It involves a "conscious ability to transform cultural practices by using language from "a position which acknowledges respect for human dignity" (Byram, Nichols and Stevens, 2001, p. 7). At the core of coexistence, symbiosis and harmony is the awareness that individuals and groups differ in numerous ways including nationality, religion, social values, beliefs and mindsets, etc. As such, coexistence fosters cohesion based on fair treatment, mutual respect, and unbiased inclusion. In short, it promotes reciprocal recognition of each other as fellow human beings despite their potential differences.

An essential part of what IC entails is engagement with others' worlds, which involves the ability to function properly in another culture. Because "the powerful ways in which one's self-concept as a member of a particular cultural group filters our interpretation of the world" (Lusting and Koester, 1999, p. 136). Looking through the frame of one's own culture can distort one's view of the new culture. For old frames offer are arbitrary and taken-for-granted ways of seeing, thinking and acting. The ability to have a new perspective permits seeing cultural differences through the prism of cultural relativism, which allows approaching others with empathy, understanding, and objectivity. It allows target language learners to revisit, revise and alter their original perspectives and perceptions of others and their worldview as a whole, a process which assists in accommodating "transcendence and transformation of one's original mode of perceiving, knowing, and expressing about the world" (Fantini, 2001, p. 1).

Because it involves "observation, description, and hypothesis-refinement" which are all diverse forms of "cultural exploration" (Phillips, 2001), IC entails a pursuit of knowledge and a quest for refining one's understanding of others, which both enable one to "have 'new eyes'" (ibid.).

Undoubtedly, the success of interaction is not solely confined to effective communication, as was the goal of communicative language teaching; it entails the ability to "decentre and take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating, and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behaviour" (Byram, 1997, p. 42).

The tendency to depict others as foreign and strange can impose barriers and hinder intercultural exchanges. From a subjective point of view, the students passed judgments based on their thoughts, feelings, values, and beliefs, which might be typified as 'cultural provincialism'. This can only lead to a myopic, shortsighted view of the world around us. The rigid application of one nation's formulas to another nation's manners has very obvious disadvantages. Portraying the 'other' in rather positive terms may enhance intercultural communication and foster communication. Intercultural learning therefore becomes a resource to build on in order to promote empathy, respect, tolerance and understanding. The students' binary forms of otherizing – the *familiar* versus the *strange* other – need to be interpreted against the backdrop of their exposure to and contact with international, but specifically Western, influences that bear upon their lives, both within and outside the university setting.

The Colloquy courses purport to develop students' intercultural learning and help them explore their multi-faceted identities, as women, as Arabs, and as Muslims; the courses seek to help students to frame their own viewpoints and appreciate the perspectives of others; they strive to develop their ability to become more aware and articulate about their role in both local and global environments. The expressed goal of the Colloquy Program outlined in the ZU mission statement is to promote student appreciation and understanding of local and global relationships, forces, and events. Yet, some written reports reveal biased judgments engendered by social and political factors that bear upon their society regionally and internationally. The students need to get a better perspective on their own cultural frames of reference, including their taken-for-granted assumptions about themselves and others whom they perceive as 'different.' There is need, therefore, for increasing learners' awareness of cultural diversity and common humanity, and developing sensitivity to potential cultural differences. It is important to promote the skills necessary for interrogating and challenging compartmental thinking, stereotypical portrayals, and false assumptions of others, still perceived by some as 'strange' and 'imperialist'.

The results are of interest and students' portrayals of others must therefore be considered in the light of these internal and external contextual factors. However, the abundance of cultural materials and easy access to and frequent contact with native speakers may not warrant automatic development of IC, as some students' negative depictions of others revealed. Comparative, triangulated data that explores the amount and kind of out-of-class contact with foreigners, would further inform and illuminate the findings.

Real intercultural learning is best achieved when it is encountered, used and implemented in real world contexts. To develop their intercultural competence, students need appropriate skills and content that will empower their learning experiences. They need an intercultural experience that will enable them to increase their awareness of cultural diversity and develop their sensitivity to potential cultural differences which may be encountered in present and future intercultural situations. By enacting culture and providing for experiential learning in the language classroom, learners stand better chances of interrogating stereotypes and challenging biased judgments. They develop the ability to see their own and others' cultural practices from a broader, more

informed perspective. This helps to provide a rich opportunity for interrogation and reconciliation of *selfness* and *otherness.* Hence there is a need for an essentially reasoned, constructive, and fact-based engagement with otherness that will help develop learners' balanced and informed perspectives of self and others.

Recommendations

One desired outcome an EFL/ESL learner must demonstrate is an understanding of the culture of FL/SL speakers. By gaining an informed, objective, and balanced understanding of aspects of the history, food, music, dance, art, and theater of a target culture, a FL/SL learner can better understand the language and be better prepared for interactions with native speakers. To capture the patchy and diverse character that typifies many English-speaking pluralist societies, language teaching materials need to reflect the multiple perspectives that characterize these societies. This constitutes a necessary step toward engaging students in a process of genuine IC learning. While stressing the richness that diversity can bring to learning, this approach engages learners' and others' identity and takes their respective perspectives into account. An environment where multiple and diverse perspectives are fostered aids learners to become better educated and more enlightened.

Learners should be enlightened about the true meanings and significances of cultural material. This they can gain through research and other diverse forms of cultural learning harvested from experiential learning, rooted in discussions and exploration, and based on analysis and cultural comparison. This is an essential step toward fostering an objective image of others. Discussion, exploration, and analysis, consolidated by comparison of cultural icons and practices, all contribute to productive and transformative intercultural encounters. They present rich opportunities for exploring the true meaning and significance of cultural practices from an insider's viewpoint. This in turn helps to develop learners' alternative and balanced views and enhances their understanding and appreciation of other people's culture and identity, a gap that is yet to be bridged in the views some student scripts displayed. Engaging learners in a process of exploration, discovery, and reflection is an ideal opportunity for creating and investing in intercultural encounters where others are treated as different from 'Us', not as *foreign* and *strange*. To understand that stereotypes and prejudices are value-laden is to triumph over the limitations of 'otherizing' and 'exoticizng' others from the prism of one's own cultural background.

Conclusion

English should not be viewed as a cultural symbol, but rather a means of enabling understanding and furthering communication. Cultural information should be presented in a non-judgmental fashion that does not place value or judgment on distinctions between the students' native culture and the culture explored in the classroom. This research shows the need for forging 'a third place' which learners can occupy as learners in their own right, rather than striving to emulate a native speaker norm that violates their very own identities. Interrogating and mediating both the native and foreign cultures need to involve familiarizing – rather than exoticizing – the target culture. Once cultural differences are viewed through the prism of cultural relativism, all cultures become of equal value; other cultures can be approached with empathy, understanding, and objectivity and this may inculcate a more inclusive humanistic vision. A critical, culturally

sensitive, pedagogy, – a 'pedagogy of respect' (Johnson, 2006) – will help to surpass dichotomizing identities into 'Us' and 'Them' and encourage new ways of being.

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