

Western Teacher meets Eastern Learner

This paper has been written for newcomers to this area of the world. I have spent most of my working life in the Gulf, and would like to share some experiences and thoughts in case they may be of help. The following comments are by no means comprehensive and I am sure you will find many blanks. Needless to say, not all Arabs will behave in the ways described below; these are merely pointers, and truth to tell, the society here is undergoing such tectonic upheavals that change is the only constant.

Note: In the anglicized versions of the Arabic words (in italics) in the text, I have put the masculine version (addressee) first and the feminine second

Introduction

Zayed University is unique in several respects, but I believe one of the most important is the desire of all involved in its creation to foster the growth of international understanding and the promotion of progress within the boundaries of the local culture. It is an American institution in concept and implementation, but it carries the name of the Ruler of the UAE, His Highness Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, whose vision has provided the women of his nation with this great opportunity for progress. H.E. Sheikh Nahayan Bin Mabarak Al Nahayan, the Minister of Higher Education and President of Zayed University, Dr Hanif Al Qassimi, our Vice President, Dr Larry Wilson, Provost and Deputy Vice President, and all those who lead us in this great enterprise are one with Sheikh Zayed in their wish to see UAE women take their rightful place in the advancement of their country, without abandoning all that is good and wholesome in their traditions and culture. I for one have never worked in a place where intercultural knowledge and understanding has been accorded such a high priority, or where the expatriate faculty and staff have been so knowledgeable about the local people and culture. It is with this in mind that I have tried to gather together some of the day-to-day interactions that could surprise newcomers to the region.

The EFL / ESL Divide

First and foremost, we teachers/lecturers should be aware that we are not in an Anglophone country, and therefore should adapt our teaching to an EFL situation, as opposed to ESL. The learning curve, in other words, is not only on the students' side. In an ESL (English as a Second Language) environment, the task of the teacher of non-native-English-speaking students is so much easier. They are immersed in the language and the culture, so whatever they find in the classroom is planted in its own habitat, so to speak. Not so with EFL (English as a Foreign Language). Here, things that we take for granted as normal and everyday, such as riding in buses or trains, may be strange to our students. It may come as a surprise to learn that a few of our students have never flown in an aeroplane. Riding bikes, leaving home at 18, dating, living together, openly discussing politics or the existence of God are activities that are commonplace in the West, but they may cause surprise or discomfort here. Once, out of curiosity,

I asked a class of girls here at ZU what the word 'date' meant to them. As anticipated, the first meaning was the fruit of the palm tree; next, the day of the month, as in 22 August. I gave them several minutes to think about it, but no-one came up with the meaning as in 'going out on a date'.

I mention these things to demonstrate that our Western sense of what is 'normal' might be quite abnormal to our students. Girls do not 'go out' alone with young men. They meet prospective spouses and become betrothed within the family circle. Marriage to cousins is still very common, but even if the suitor is not a family member (he may be the son of a family friend), he would still observe the traditional formalities. These may differ from place to place, but generally speaking, after an initial ice-breaker visit by the mother and a sister or two of the potential suitor, a delegation of respected males from the young man's family would visit the girl's family to formally ask for her hand. In most cases (and following Islamic precepts), the girl makes her choice without coercion. If she agrees, arrangements are made for the happy couple to 'write the book' at some future date. That is, in the presence of a religious sheikh and two male witnesses, they sign a marriage contract which would include the dowry, a sum of money promised by the groom which would revert to the bride in case of divorce. All of these traditions are a way of protecting the bride and endure from a time when a woman usually depended on the only men she could be sure of trusting – the members of her own family. Families make extensive enquiries regarding the suitor prior to the signing of the marriage contract - ensuring that he is of sound character and reputation, and will be a good husband and provider. Afterwards, the young couple may spend time together, but usually accompanied by a chaperone. Even though they are now legally married, and would have to legally divorce if they decided not to go ahead, they do not cohabit until after a wedding party, which amounts to a public commitment to each other. This could take place months or even years later.

This then, is but one example of a custom which we as the incomers to this society need to take on board as normal. Such traditions are part of everyday life in this society. Even though huge changes are happening all around, the family is still the hub and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Being aware of what is normal for our students is important when writing or searching for texts for use in the classroom or examinations. Thus, asking for a process essay on what happens from arrival at the airport to departure point is just as inappropriate for our students as it would be back in Liverpool UK or Peoria Illinois, where there would also be some students disadvantaged by not having had the experience. We should be wary of making assumptions. Again, such examples may be on fairly safe territory in an ESL classroom, where the students will have traveled from their home countries to Canada or wherever, but we must remind ourselves that here, we are the foreigners, not our students. What is familiar to us may be outside the experience of our students, and as unfamiliar schema can add unnecessary stress to situations where language is

already an issue, the burden is on us to familiarize ourselves with our students' world, not the other way around. Aside from thinking about the content, teachers could ask themselves – and indeed many do – how they would feel about a task if they had to do it in French or Spanish or some other language that they have learned but is still foreign to them.

The most important advantage that ESL students have is probably the variety of accents that they are exposed to in an English-speaking country. Our EFL learners are not so lucky. A majority of our students come from schools where the only English they have been exposed to has been taught by non-native-speaking teachers; hence they are used to Arabic-influenced accents of varying strengths. Many of them need time to accustom the ears to the onslaught of fast speech coming at them in a variety of accents. What is more, the importance to our students of 'saving face' in front of their peers cannot be over-emphasised. Especially at the start of their sojourn with us, when everything and everybody is strange, they do not want to show or admit that they have not understood. This can happen even further along the line, when they may need time to adjust to a new teacher's accent. So it must be acknowledged that native-speaker speed of delivery, added to the strangeness of the accents, could cause initial incomprehension, embarrassment and consequent raising of the affective filter, particularly in new students. One American faculty member told me of an embarrassing encounter with a British colleague, who greeted her with some English words; she still couldn't grasp what he was saying after three attempts! So have pity on our students, who do become quite fluent in an amazingly short time.

Learning Styles

Pedagogically, it would be wise to move on from where our students are when they come to ZU. If they have come from a teacher-centered, book-learning, lock-step background, it may be as well to introduce a more learner-centered and independent style gradually, rather than throw them in the deep end and expect too much too soon.

Much has been written and said about the need to change the 'rote' learning style that our students carry over from schools. Certainly, a great strength of our students is their ability to memorise, and where possible (e.g., in EFL, the learning of irregular verbs) this talent could be exploited, thus placing the students in a familiar learning environment, at least temporarily, and giving the boost that comes from that 'can-do' feeling.

Moreover, being good at memorization is not incompatible with being able to think critically, another constant refrain: people believe that this is a skill that is under-developed and needs to be fostered as a matter of urgency. It should be borne in mind that the problem may be with the language rather than the ability to think critically, especially at first.

Plagiarism is another area which can cause disputes, although this is not confined to this part of the world; thanks to the Internet, it is a universal problem. Nonetheless, there is a divergence of perspective at play here. In the Golden Age of Islam, when Europeans came to the great centers of learning such as those in Baghdad, Cairo, Kairouan in Tunisia and Cordoba in Spain, to sit at the feet of the masters and carry knowledge back home to introduce some light into the Dark Ages, copying was never a problem. The work of predecessors has always been acknowledged, because no scholar, great or small, imagined that he had achieved his erudition on his own: it was a culmination of study built upon the work of others who had gone before. In the same way, his work was there for others to expand upon. But there has never, in all the history of learning in the Arab world, been such a concept as intellectual property being a marketable commodity.

All this is not to say that students do not knowingly copy illegally, but they may find it difficult to understand why they have to change words which support their thesis perfectly, to a less-than-perfect paraphrase. It may take time and patience to get the message across that all ideas and quotes must be acknowledged. Teachers who adopt an understanding and gradual approach may have more success than those who – justifiably, but perhaps too hastily – point the finger of blame.

A different aspect of the same universal problem is cheating, which is often perceived as ‘helping a friend’. In a society where cooperation has meant survival, and indeed still does in the poorer parts of the Arab world, helping a friend carries no shame. The only way to overcome this is in exactly the same way we do in the West: do not provide the opportunity; keep exam conditions as strict as possible.

Religion

The most influential feature of society in the UAE is Islam, the Muslim religion. Our students love their religion, and because Allah chose to send down his message in Arabic, they also love and revere their language. It would never be proper to criticize the language in any way, even as a joke.

When referring to the prophet Mohammed, it is advisable to say just that – the prophet Mohammed, rather than just Mohammed, which sounds disrespectful to Muslim ears. Muslims will usually add “Peace be upon him” in speech, at least at the first mention, and (PBUH) in writing.

The Qur’an, or Koran, is the book in which the Word of God, as received by the prophet Mohammed (PBUH) is recorded. As such it is to be treated with the utmost respect. Muslims refer to it as the Holy Qur’an, and often keep it on a special stand. It would be disrespectful to place anything on top of it if it was on a table, for instance.

Never refer to the call to prayer as 'singing'. It is not; it is a call, and should only be referred to as such. Some of our students are so religious that they may object to music or singing being used in the classrooms, but they are very few. However, if you wish to use music for any reason, it would be wise to check that it is acceptable to all. It is illustrative of the respect and tolerance of Muslims that if only one person objects to having music played in a class or activity, all the students will concede to her request.

A common misunderstanding that arises between Muslims and Westerners is the use, by Arabs everywhere, of the expression "Insha'allah." This means "If God wills," and when fixing appointments or making arrangements, an Arab will more often than not close the conversation with these words. Many Westerners, perhaps trying to arrange a time for the plumber to come and fix a leak, become either agitated or amused, because they believe it is a kind of loop-hole for their co-arranger to wriggle through (a belief greatly reinforced when the plumber fails to show), but it is nothing of the sort. It is an acknowledgement of the power of the Almighty; not to say these words, or at least believe in them, amounts almost to sacrilege. So don't be too alarmed when students respond to your exhortations to hand in their work tomorrow with "Insha'allah".

Another speech event which reflects the embedded nature of Islam in Arab society is "Mashallah", which means "What God has willed" or more loosely "The work of God", and gives credit to God for any gift or talent, rather than to the possessor of it. It also reflects an atavistic adherence to superstition, for without the utterance of this expression people feel vulnerable to the 'evil eye'; rather as a Westerner 'touches wood' to ward off bad luck. It is advisable to learn this expression and use it when indulging in praise or flattery. There are other formulaic utterances in Arabic, some of which have an equivalent in English, and it is interesting to note that the Arabic expression usually invokes God, whereas the English equivalent, where one exists, is more often secular. An example is "Allah ma'ak" – God be with you – which equates with our "Bon voyage", although it can be used for any leave-taking. Interestingly, all Arabic speakers use these Islamic expressions as everyday currency, regardless of creed.

It is important for the visitor or worker in this area to be aware that the Islamic religion is part of the very fabric of society in the Gulf countries. It is quite normal to see men facing Mecca and performing their prayers at the roadside, on the city pavements, anywhere, and the non-Muslim should be aware that it is **disrespectful to walk in front of the person praying**. There is a prayer room for the students, but you may find that some students prefer to pray in the classroom. They are totally unselfconscious about this. There is no trace of 'holier than thou', and in fact this casual attitude towards prayer demonstrates the interwoven nature of Islam and society. Male faculty should not enter the classroom while a female student is praying. This could result in delaying the start of a class; faculty do not have to accept this as an excuse, as there is ample

opportunity for the prayer to be said within the prescribed hours. However, it is as well to check with individual students that their schedule allows for this, as sometimes a tight schedule combined with a long bus journey home may place them outside the time allowed.

Unfortunately, to many Westerners, Islam represents a force against freedom, and indeed, seen from their perspective, it is, for it prohibits the taking of any substance (e.g. alcohol) which causes one to lose control of one's mind, to mention just one restriction. However, for the Muslim, this is not to restrict freedom in the larger sense, as to him, losing control over one's own actions is the antithesis of freedom, not to mention loss of responsibility and accountability for one's actions. In Islam, accountability is as important on earth as it is in the hereafter. To Muslims, their religion is a way of life which the majority embrace wholeheartedly, even if they fail to adhere to every tenet at all times.

Another illustration of differing perceptions is the month-long fast during the month of Ramadan, when Muslims are required to refrain from eating or drinking anything from sunrise to sunset. It is hard, especially during the summer months, but Muslims welcome the fast as Christians welcome Easter, and Jews welcome Passover. Zayed University celebrates Ramadan and there is always an *Iftar* (a meal when the fast is broken – breakfast) offered for faculty and staff. It is wonderful to see how everybody, from Dr Hanif to the cleaners, mingles together and enjoys the feast. That is the essence of Islam – equality before the Creator.

Restaurants and cafes remain closed during the daylight hours in these predominantly Muslim countries, and even among non-Muslims, few would wish to be seen eating or drinking. Nevertheless, because women are not allowed to fast during menstruation, you may find some having a snack at university. This does not bother the other students, and likewise, faculty and staff who are not Muslims do not have to go to great lengths to 'hide'. As long as they stay in their offices to eat or drink, they should not be too alarmed if a student unexpectedly walks in and 'catches' them; locking doors and posting signs is rather over-egging the pudding, if you'll pardon the metaphor.

Nonetheless, Ramadan invariably arouses strong feelings in some non-Muslims, and the holy month never passes without a Western colleague expressing cynicism and disbelief about Muslims' adherence to the fast. Muslims count their quota of people who are economical with the truth, who cheat and steal, just as in any group, but the fast is between a Muslim and his God, and he feels no need to lie about it. Of course the fast may have a deleterious effect on the mood, on the ability to work efficiently, especially during the first few days until the body adapts, but it is not the place of teachers to criticise, for the fast is one of the five Pillars of Islam, and as such is hugely important. It is not difficult to understand how some teachers can feel frustrated because both receptive and productive learning tend to slow down during Ramadan, but we should at least acknowledge

the spiritual and social dimensions and perhaps incorporate them in some way into our lessons. Ramadan is a time for families and friends to strengthen ties, for traditions and childhood rituals. We could use the occasion for some intercultural activity. Take the chance to visit the 'Ramadan Tents' which can be found everywhere, in restaurants, hotels, and even private homes. Families gather there to drink coffee, smoke the hubble-bubble, play backgammon, dominoes and cards, and maybe listen to a musician playing a traditional *oud* (lute).

Family and Tribal Connections

It is important to show respect for persons of rank. In the Arab tradition, chiefs and leaders have been chosen, by tribal elders, on the grounds of their worthiness – they must be of impeccable integrity, and exemplary conduct and character, thus deserving of the credit that is due to them. Hence, you will always hear the contributions of the leaders of this country appreciated in any speech or discourse which deals with institutions or events based in the UAE.

This respect is evident in the attitude of young people towards their elders, especially their parents. Our students will tell you that they would not wish to marry a person who is not acceptable to and approved of by their parents. Many will say that they would wish their parents to choose a husband for them, as they know that they only want what is best for them. In their daily life, our students would not do anything without the permission of their father. Most socializing is done within the extended family, as parents need to be sure that their offspring – particularly daughters – are in good company. Regarding being in the company of males, a woman should never be alone with a man whom she could marry. This restricts her to her father, grandfathers, brothers and uncles, as she cannot marry them.

In this regard, it is essential that male faculty never allow themselves to be alone in a closed room with a student.

The family is the centre of their lives, the net which will not allow any harm to come to them. They feel safe and protected, and they return this with a love and connection to their extended families which continues throughout their lives. Honour is very important in this society, and women are always aware of the fact that their behaviour can make or break the reputation of their family name. Hence the care that the university takes to ensure that our students are not exposed to any circumstances that may put them at risk of scandal, and why going out on trips can be a more complicated affair than in a Western school.

Manners and Social Interaction

When meeting someone for the first time, it is advisable to wait until the person to whom you are being introduced extends his or her hand to shake it, as it may not be acceptable to some Muslims to shake the hand of a person of the opposite sex.

The harsh conditions of the desert mean that anyone at any time may fall prey to misfortune. Thus, any traveler is made welcome by the bedouin, who will go out of their way to help, literally. A bedu will act as a host or a guide. This willingness to put himself out may be based on the kind of philosophy which states 'What goes around, comes around.' In other words, nobody knows when he will be in need of similar assistance.

Moreover, the bedu will not expect payment. In the bedouin society, it is a matter of pride to be able to provide, and a bedu will give generously, even if he goes short himself. Thus, the guest is pressed to eat to his fill and more, and is offered the best part of the meat or whatever.

In modern times, this generosity is reflected in the help that people of bedouin origin – say Gulf Arabs – will give to travelers in their 4X4s when they get stuck in the sand. I can remember being unable to get out of the sand in a patch of desert used as a parking lot. A wonderful Emirati man insisted on getting down on his hands and knees and digging, in spite of the fact that he was wearing a pristine white dishdasha. No hidden agenda – just helping the traveler in trouble. Same thing in the desert itself, when lots of Westerners – and Arabs - try their hand at dune-bashing - a favourite with many newcomers – and inevitably get into trouble. There'll always be some young descendants of the old bedouin tribes around in their 4X4s who will stop to help. It's the tradition – the lore of the desert.

It does not need repeating that what may be normal social interaction and proxemics in one culture may appear brusque and/or hostile in another. In the case of Arabic speakers and Western expatriates, the possibilities for misunderstanding are legion, for not only is language used in different ways, even silence has its place in the social interactions of Arabs, particularly the bedouin. Where we Westerners feel we must fill the unforgiving minute with words, for the bedouin there is nothing uncomfortable about long silences. The 'straight-talking', 'say it as it is', no-beating-about-the-bush directness that characterises many Westerners does not necessarily sit well in an Arab context. Politeness in Arab society requires a less direct, more gentle approach. When Arabs meet, one may hear not one, but several enquiries after the health of the interlocutors, and each individual member of their respective families. If one visits a ministry office or a place of business, it may take a lot longer than anticipated to get to the point, after the exchange of pleasantries, possibly a cup of sweet tea or Arabic coffee, and a dozen interruptions. Even if one enters a strange shop to buy a newspaper, it is polite to greet the shopkeeper with a "Good day" or better "Salam aleikum" (peace be upon you) before making one's purchases.

If you were to visit schools, for example, on university business, you would have to factor in time for meeting the school principal, even if your business did not involve him or her, and enjoying a cup of tea or coffee.

A teacher from Al Ain was telling me about an occasion when she was asked to go to a home to give a private lesson. She arrived, was treated to the usual generous hospitality, and sent on her way without having given any tuition. But the next day, she was asked to commence the private lessons. The initial visit was a chance for the family to meet and talk – an informal interview, and an opportunity for the family to ensure that their offspring was in good hands.

Politeness and consideration for others are the cornerstones of Arab societies, and the hospitality for which they are famous. The formalities of greeting and saying goodbye may strike the Westerner as being long-winded, and there are ritualistic phrases for almost every occasion, it seems. Guests are given priority over family members, and everyone is expected to contribute to their comfort. Even so, some of the behaviour which you will encounter may strike you as being brusque, or even rude, though it is rarely so by design.

For example, words like ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ are not accorded the importance westerners tend to give them, surprising in a culture which sets great store by ritualistic social exchanges. Thus, teachers may be surprised to hear a student request something – for instance, a book, or some paper – by saying “I want paper”. This is not because there is no equivalent for ‘please’ in Arabic – *lo samaht*, or *min fadlak/fadlik* - but perhaps Arabs perceive these expressions as cumbersome and superfluous. Arabs will say the equivalent of “perhaps” – *mumkin* – to soften a request, but as they know this is not used in English, it leaves them with only the functional expression. Of course, teaching what is considered polite behaviour and language in other societies can be beneficial, but these are habits formed over a lifetime, so the results may not be as effective as one would wish. Also, a point which Anne Helms made in a paper presented at an Anthropological Association meeting in the States: “One way of asking a question in Arabic is to simply change the inflection at the end of the sentence without changing the word order. When an Arab says, ‘You will get me a cup of coffee?’ that is a polite request to him but it may sound like an order to an American who will feel offended by the presumption.” (1978:10)

Greetings are important, as indeed they are to most Americans, though maybe less so to other English-speaking nationalities. Arabs say good morning (*Sabah el khair*: literally, ‘morning of abundance’), good afternoon (*mese el khair*), etc., and usually follow it up with ‘How are you?’ (*Shlonak/Shlonik?* or *Kayf el hal?*), just as English speakers do, but the Arabs have a whole raft of additional or alternative ways of saying good morning/afternoon, each more poetic than the last. To save yourself having to remember the different greetings, the ideal is the universal Arabic greeting – *assalamu aleikum* – peace be with you. Not only is it a beautiful greeting, but the minimal effort to assimilate that is required by the speaker is disproportionately and gratifyingly appreciated by the local interlocutor. Whenever you approach an Arab, or a group of Arabs, or even enter a shop, before addressing them use this greeting. You will see the faces light up in welcome. The correct response is “*wa aleikum assalam*” – and to you peace.

The males among you have already been informed that you must knock and wait before entering a room where students are present. A male colleague was heard to express impatience at this, taking it as an insult to his own sense of propriety (“I’m not going to do anything!”), but as another colleague pointed out, it’s rather like someone walking into the wrong-gender changing room at a sports complex. The people inside would feel discomfited even if they were perfectly decently attired. Our students would feel equally uncomfortable if a man ‘caught’ them without their *shayla* covering their heads.

A class of girls once told me that they were embarrassed by the fact that they could see the knees of their female teacher. They said they did not know which way to look and kept their eyes averted. I was somewhat surprised, as I had supposed that being all women together, there would be more of a ‘laid-back’ attitude. But they were embarrassed, which must have had an effect on the amount of learning that was taking place. These girls may not be representative; I have spoken to others who disagreed, but a ‘false positive’ - erring on the side of caution – is better than a ‘false negative’ – throwing caution to the winds!

Moral: If you want your students to concentrate on learning, avoid clothing that may shock. The university requires women to wear skirts or trousers that cover the knees, and sleeves that cover the upper arms, and it would seem that such rules are not only culturally appropriate, but also comprise sound educational practice.

One thing that is quite noticeable in confined and crowded spaces is the languid gait of our students, a characteristic which can cause delay and annoyance to those more used to hustle and bustle. It must be borne in mind that in all hot countries, avoiding dehydration is of paramount importance, and one can only assume that the slow, elegant walk has evolved over countless generations as a survival strategy. Plus, of course, the need in days not so long gone, to carry water from the well on the head – a few of our students may have great-grandmothers who did just that – has given the ladies a grace that would make a super-model envious! Do we want to change them?

Even something as simple as admiring garments, or jewelry, or somebody’s new handbag is hedged about with cultural pitfalls. If you admire something, you may find that the person you are addressing will offer to give you the object of admiration. The response to this is to decline graciously, saying that it looks much better on its owner.

Admiring children can also be tricky. Some people (of any race) are afraid that drawing attention to beauty or other qualities may attract ‘the eye’, (i.e., the evil eye) and something bad may happen to the child. Arabs try to avoid this by adding the words “mash Allah” (the work of God) to the compliment, thus giving all credit to Allah. At a Dean’s List ceremony here at Zayed U., I learned from a colleague that the fathers of the girls receiving their awards did not applaud, for

the same reason. This may seem unnecessarily uncompromising – after all, the girls had worked hard, but it is easier to understand if we realize that all things come from Allah, and the fathers want no harm to befall their girls.

It is considered most impolite to sit in such a way that the soles of the feet or shoes can be seen by anybody sitting with you. In fact, it may be taken as a deliberate insult.

It is also considered impolite to turn towards a person in a group so that your back is turned towards others. If this is unavoidable, it is best to say something along the lines of “Please excuse my back!” to show that you do not mean to exclude.

Eating Etiquette

An area where East and West may differ is in their perceptions of generosity. Hospitality has been the hallmark of Arabs and other Eastern people for countless generations, and even when they are not rich, they will offer to share a meal, or pay for tickets, or extend invitations. There are some occasions when the words are formulaic utterances, and the members of the same culture know the formulaic response. An illustration is when you enter a room where an Arab is eating, or even just pass by a table in the cafeteria, they will urge you to join them and share their food. The correct response is to place the right hand on the upper part of the chest and gracefully decline. They may insist, and of course, there is a point at which an Arab knows that it would be impolite to refuse (three refusals is the norm), but these subtleties are hard to fathom for the outsider. Indeed, Arab students in Western countries have learned this to their cost, when fellow students have responded to their invitation by tucking in with gusto!

If a Western person receives a visit from an Arab friend or neighbour, it is likely that the usual, “Would you like a cup of tea or coffee?” would be refused, politely, as Arabs are trained from childhood to decline offers of food or drink unless the host insists quite strongly. This has its roots in the old Eastern tradition of ‘saving face’. By doing this, the visitor is trying to avoid putting his hosts on the spot – a hangover from the days of feast and famine. An Arab host gets around this difficulty by bringing refreshments without asking. Even the order of refreshments is fixed: first, a cold drink with dish of nuts, then some fruit, then perhaps some small cakes with tea, and finally, a cup of Arabic or Turkish coffee. This is the unspoken sign for the more formal visitor to leave, after the coffee is drunk. Of course, none of these routines apply to close friends or family. In some situations, especially here in the Gulf, a servant may be going around serving coffee; he will refill your cup until you tip it from side to side to indicate that you have had enough.

Conclusion

One outstanding quality of the people here is their ability to adapt and understand. One colleague mentioned that the best advice he heard was from an

Emirati member of staff who said that expatriates should not worry because they would be forgiven any unintentional *faux pas*. They accept and respect us, particularly if we reciprocate. Many of our students are well-travelled and quite cosmopolitan in outlook. Satellite television has of course opened the world up to all of us. Nevertheless, some of our students may not have TV at home, or may only watch local programs, so we cannot make assumptions in that regard.

We are fortunate to have the opportunity to work in such an exciting and fascinating country at a time when the past and the present meet, with all that implies of tradition, history, modernity, variety and sheer exuberance. Be assured that all who teach and work at Zayed University are unanimous in their opinion of the students: charming, polite, warm and welcoming, and above all, a delight to teach.

Patricia Ryan Abu Wardeh
English Language Center
Zayed University
Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Email: patricia.wardeh@zu.ac.ae
+9714 2082 487

Some Useful Phrases

- ☒ *Assalamu aleikum* – greeting
- ☒ *Aleikum assalam* – response to greeting
- ☒ *Ma assalama* - goodbye
- ☒ *Marhaba* – hello – is a less formal way of greeting.
- ☒ *Mabrouk* – congratulations – is more liberally used than in Anglophone countries. It is of course the correct reaction to news of big events, like engagement or marriage, the birth of a baby, but it is also okay to “*mabrouk*” someone who has just bought a car, or even new clothes. The correct response is “*Allahi barak feek / feeki*, meaning ‘the blessings of Allah be upon you’.
- ☒ When someone arrives from abroad, or after being away for some time, the greeting is “*Hamdillah assalame*” – ‘thank God you are safe’. The response to this is “*Allahi salmak / salmik* – ‘God keep you safe’.
- ☒ Say “*yislam idayk/dayki*” – God save your hands -to your host/hostess show appreciation of food
- ☒ At the end of a meal or even when finishing a drink of tea or coffee, say “*da’yemen*”; it means that you hope there will always be food/drink in his house.
- ☒ The Arabs have an expression for wishing a sick person well – *salamtak/salamtik* – which can be said to someone complaining of a mild headache as readily as to hospital patient. The response to this is *allahi salmak/salmik*
- ☒ There is even an expression to use to a person who has just had a haircut: *Naeeman*, to which the response is *Allah y n ‘am a leik/leiki*.

