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## **The Role of Face and Perception of Self in the Arabic Maritime Learner**

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### **Abstract**

This paper will report on a study conducted during 2006 at the Australian Maritime College (AMC) involving native Arabic speaking students. The initial phase of maritime training undertaken by these students is their first experience of tertiary education in their second language. It has been observed that difficulties have been experienced by some students in adapting to the English speaking maritime learning environment. These difficulties have sometimes resulted in the manifestation of negative behaviours including lack of engagement in the learning process, defiant behavior, an unwillingness to socialise with class peers, poor academic performance, and non-participation in remedial student support programs. This study has been conceived in order to identify and better understand relevant cross cultural issues that may be underlying the negative behaviours observed to date. Data has been gathered using semi-structured interviews with a student focus group. A sample was selected from current Arabic AMC students who have completed, or are currently enrolled in their first phase of maritime training. It is anticipated that the findings of this study will provide information on the role factors such as student identity and face, as well as the way in which they contribute to the observed behaviours in maritime training context.

### **Introduction**

The Australian Maritime College has been involved in the delivery of Maritime Education and Training (MET) since 1978. Although AMC was established to service the requirements of the Australian maritime industry, students have been attracted to AMC from a range of countries, with the majority of students coming from India and Pakistan. In 2002 there were significant changes to the Australian Immigration Act which resulted in a significant decline in overseas students from these countries. Following this decline in student numbers, efforts were made to attract maritime students from regions where immigration restrictions were less stringent. The Arabian Gulf region was targeted and the AMC has since seen a steady increase in maritime students from this region. This process has improved the size of the AMC overseas student base,

but has introduced issues relating to language, culture and student identity that are new to the AMC.

## **Context**

Prior to the post 2002 changes in nationality of the AMC overseas student base, the use of English as the language for MET was not associated with any significant language or cross-cultural problems. Reasons for this observation can be attributed to the common use of English in the home countries of the students from the Subcontinent and the career entry point of these students. These students typically had been working for several years in the capacity of a deck officer cadet or as an able seaman on a merchant ship where the working language was English. Students from the Arabian Gulf region differ in that they are typically year 12 high school graduates who have undertaken English language training in the UK or Australia to gain an IELTS score of 5.5 in preparation for commencing a Certificate III in Pre Sea Training (Deck). This course is the first phase in a three and a half year cadetship program resulting in an Advanced Diploma of Applied Science (Nautical Science) and a commercial licence to work as a deck watchkeeping officer on a merchant ship.

## **Rationale**

In order to gain some perspective on the enormity of the learning task faced by students coming from the Gulf States, it may be useful to put oneself in the reverse situation. Imagine for a moment having to learn Arabic as a general working language to a standard of basic competency. This is followed by a 400 hour course, over 14 weeks in a new and dominating discourse community. Lectures often involve a technical dialect that you have not encountered in your language school. You are totally immersed, thousands of kilometres from home, in a community with vastly differing views on religion, communication of ideas and social values. There are political overtones between the West and the Arab Gulf region, and some people you encounter treat you with suspicion because you are not from the dominant culture. This is the situation that Gulf students encounter when they commence a cadetship. This study has been conducted in an attempt to gain some understanding about the cross-cultural experiences of a group of four Arabian pre sea students who have completed their Pre Sea phase of training. It has been undertaken in response to unexpected interaction with a recent intake of Arabian Gulf students. The behaviours observed within a group had not previously been encountered and included:

- An apparent reluctance to engage with the learning process.
- A slower than usual socialization process with class peers.
- Poor academic performance.
- A reluctance to undertake remedial student support programs.

Reflecting on this situation has led to a number of questions that required investigation.

## **The Research Statement**

Taylor (1987) is of the opinion that “Problems often result from misunderstandings or value conflicts between teachers and students who are obeying different culturally based communication rules” (p.4). A similar situation has also been observed in business dealings (Scollon and Scollon, 2001; Williams, 1998). Taylor also points out that in these situations teachers should not blame the student or the culture. In light of these views, the following questions have arisen:

- Do Arabian Gulf students undergo a process of willing or forced acculturation in the AMC learning environment?
- Is the concept of ‘face’ a significant cross-cultural issue that exist between the Gulf Arabian student and AMC discourse communities?
- How does the Gulf Arabian concept of ‘self’ affect their learning experience?
- How do issues such as stereotyping, teacher ethnicity and gender affect their learning experience?

According to Taylor (1987) “knowledge of other cultures is better acquired by experience than by study” (p.1). This situation provides an opportunity to learn through the experience of talking with members of another discourse community. Although learning about a culture is best achieved through total immersion in that culture (Clyne, 2004; Taylor, 1987) conducting a small case study provided a starting point for developing an awareness and appreciation of cross-cultural issues with the AMC.

## **Research Approach**

A qualitative case study approach was adopted for this investigation. The unique nature, scope, well defined boundaries and descriptive nature of the data being sought in this situation have resulted in the choice of this approach. Although a descriptive research approach does not generally produce findings that are generalisable (Burns, 2000; Isaac & Michael, 1995) the findings may prove relevant to other MET institutions involved in training Arabian Gulf students. If this proves to be the case, this study can be considered as a pilot study that can later be expanded to include other MET institutions.

## **Sampling**

The sample used for this study is small, consisting of four Arab AMC maritime students who have previously completed the Certificate III in Pre Sea Training (Deck) course, and are currently engaged in later phases of study. All of the participants had travelled from Oman to study in Australia. They had undertaken English Language training at the University of Tasmania prior to commencing maritime study at the AMC. This sample has been selected opportunistically and will not be representative of other Arabian Gulf students studying in other institutions. However, the data gathered should produce relevant information that may assist in the development of appropriate induction and teaching strategies for students from the Arabian

Gulf region. These students are well known in the AMC community and were enthusiastic in their desire to assist with this study.

## Data Gathering Instruments

Data for this study has been gathered using a focus group and semi-structured interview. This permitted a reflexive approach to be taken which allowed flexibility in questioning, the development of rapport with the interview participants, observance of non-verbal and behavioural cues, rephrasing of questions and probing as required. All of these elements are considered to be important for this research approach according to Burns (2000). The focus group was conducted in April 2006 and recorded for subsequent review. Responses to questions asked and subsequent probing have been transcribed for analysis and reflection. A possible limitation of the data collected is that it may be affected by a participant's perception of the interviewer and concerns relating to how the information provided will be used. It is possible that the interviewer can be seen as a spy according to Burgess (1989) or is regarded as an outsider (Clyne, 2004) by the interview participants. However, in this case, the high degree of enthusiasm shown by the students in the sample should provide a reasonable level of confidence in the quality of the interview data.

## Gulf Students as Maritime Learners

Although this case study is primarily concerned with the acquisition of knowledge relating to face and perception of self as a learner, there are broader cross-cultural issues which will also be explored. These include the process of acculturation, which may have influenced the Arabian Gulf student's perception of their Pre Sea learning experience. Acculturation as described by Scollon and Scollon (2001) is a process where people who are immersed in a dominating new culture tend to adapt to the new culture at the expense of their own (p.163).

Do cadets from the Arabian Gulf states feel that they are undergoing forced acculturation as a result of linguistic imperialism with the Australian MET discourse community and take offense to this? Are these cadets consenting participants in a more informal process, where learning is undertaken largely through observation and imitation in order to gain acceptance within this new discourse community? The following statements from the study participants may provide some insight into these questions:

*...and be prepared for shock culture”(sic) “part of it its not a shock actually  
.....we had to adapt our self on this culture Australian culture not becoming a  
part of it, but adapting himself to life in here”(sic). “you have to adjust yourself to  
this life.*

The use of the word 'adapt' and the phrase 'not becoming a part of it' seem to indicate that these students are not undergoing a process of forced acculturation “where a dominant culture comes to supplant the culture over which it has come to exercise its power: (Scollon and Scollon, p.179). It also appears that the participants are not concerned that their sense of self may be compromised by their exposure to the AMC maritime discourse.

So why do these students allow themselves to become immersed in the Australian (Western) culture? *“We haven’t been forced, we chose.”* was the response of the group when asked whether they took offence at having to gain qualifications in English rather than in Arabic. When asked what motivated them as learners, *“good money”* was the initial response, *“English is the main language in the world”* and *“To see Australia”* were others. The group collectively indicated that they had looked forward to coming to Australia. However, the greatest motivation for them for becoming maritime students at AMC was to ensure they gained a good career. It appears that any potential difficulties imposed by cross-cultural issues were worth experiencing in order to attain the greater goals. There were however, elements of the learning experience that at the time of occurrence, were quite challenging for this group. These were related to the communal view of self that was apparent in the members of the focus group.

According to Canning & Bornstein (2001), Mehraby (2004) and Williams (1998) and to an extent by Scollon and Scollon (2001) Arabic individuals tend to see themselves as a part of a larger collective group, where the group or community is seen as more important than the individual. This view was supported in this study, demonstrated by the comment *“they feel like brothers all together, like staying at home”* from one member of the focus group. As a result, one would expect that the concept of ‘self’ as a learner held by the Arabian Gulf Student would be different to the view of self held by Australian students. When investigating this concept with the focus group, a communal sense of self of this group became very apparent. The following responses provided evidence of this:

*“For me when somebody like, if he was Arabian in the class for something he done it wrong it is like he is abusing me as well, so I go to him and ask him not to do that thing again because it is embarrassing to us as well.”* (sic).

*“Because his the mistake, like because he is an Arab and we are Arab, you may think we are all like that.”* (sic).

*“Because they are Arabs and we are Arabs, their names are related to our names. If they do something ... people in the AMC or staff in the AMC will say that all Arabs are like that. ... We find that very offensive.”*

These responses seem to indicate that these students tend to associate themselves with the success or the shortcomings of other members within their discourse community. During the interview the group seemed to be acutely aware of and concerned about their standing within their group and also appeared very aware of the concept of face.

Face, according to the focus group is an important aspect of Arabian Gulf culture. The group reported that this was at times, an issue that led to some discomfort during their Pre Sea learning experience. Responses from the group supported the view of Williams (1998) that as Arabs, they tend avoid making people feel bad, and that it is important for a negative message to be delivered in accordance with Arabic discourse rules to achieve this. Incidents recalled by the group that related to loss of face were all classroom based. The first of these related to an Arab student being chastised for arriving late for class in front of the class. Punctuality is a very important part of life at sea and all Pre Sea students receive equal treatment in this situation.

According to the following responses, punctuality is not perceived as important by the members of the focus group who responded with statements such as:

*“Some guys are Arabian and are on time but some others they just don’t care”*

*“Even in Australia we have heard that Arabs are not always on time”*

*“Lateness not generally a problem at home”*

*“For me, I am not good at time”*

These statements tend to support the view that the Arabian conceptualisation of time is very different to that found in Western cultures (Canning & Bornstein 2001; Williams, 1998). The importance of Western time keeping may be viewed as a form of forced acculturation to these students. When questioned about the impact of the teacher’s response to lateness the focus group provided the following responses:

*“Because his the mistake, like because he is an Arab and we are Arab, you may think we are all like that.” (sic).*

When asked if the group considered this treatment fair the response was:

*“ If only saying that to Arab students ... not fair”*

The group gave a strong impression that they did not enjoy being singled out for correction if the same standard was not applied to students of all nationalities. When asked whether that had occurred, the group indicated that they had not observed any difference in treatment of students with respect to punctuality. This may be an area that could be dealt with in a more culturally aware manner. Williams (1998) warns the Westerner that where fault is to be allocated in a public setting, the person responsible for the loss of face may be targeted for either overt or covert retribution for the offended Arab. The suggested solution to this is not to provoke a deliberate and open confrontation with a Gulf Arab regardless of the truth or other factors in the case (p. 31). The suggested approach in this situation is one involving patience and being prepared to “shoulder some or all of the blame” even when faultless (p.32), raise the issues privately, calmly and gently or simply overlook the issue. This is supported by the focus group’s opinion that loss of face depends on how the message is delivered, particularly when poor academic performance is involved.

When asked about the effect on an Arabian Gulf student of being directed to student support for assistance, the group indicated that this would cause loss of face. The group also indicated that this would be more extreme if others in their cohort did not need assistance. This appears to be another example of manifestation of the community view of self. When questioned about what effect receiving a grade of fail for a unit of study had on the group, responses included:

*“Embarrassing” “shocked” “depressing” “felt like failure” “ it not makes me angry it will makes me to just run away go back (home)” (sic).*

When asked why the students persisted with their studies one response was:

*“Just adjust yourself to it”.*

This is another aspect of voluntary acculturation taking place, the students have experienced loss of face, which they believe also affects their entire group but managed to work through the issues, adjust and complete their studies successfully.

Not all of the examples of loss of face identified were attributable to students' actions. There were instances recounted where some teachers either deliberately or inadvertently contributed to loss of face of some students within the focus group. Examples include:

*Some of teachers, I am not saying all, they were like they were talking too...they are supposed to talk with students who are able to speak English...our English not at that level to allow us to study pre sea. I still remember like sometimes I don't understand five sentences, six sentences together. I tried to ask questions but I feel embarrassed or something because I don't understand my problem and I'm not saying it's the teachers problem, like my English wasn't very good but I was afraid or I was embarrassed to ask questions because I don't understand actually what is said. How am I going to ask a question?*

*Mainly ... because there are teachers in the AMC who are not Australian. Yes that is what happened to me actually. If I ask them a question, would just sometimes they would ignore us because of our English ....so I would be embarrassed, I wouldn't talk.(sic).*

This response leads to the question of whether the ethnicity of a teacher was an issue with Arabian Gulf students. When the focus group was asked whether this was the case they indicated that it was the personality rather than the ethnicity of the teacher that was behind the reported teacher behavior. The response:

*“we have got many people of them in my country they are lecturers even in university”(sic).*

confirmed that for this group the ethnicity of a teacher was not a consideration with respect to teacher authority within this sample.

The combination of loss of face, group view of 'self' and believing that the teachers at AMC are wrong in trying to enforce Western rules about punctuality, may have contributed to the unexpected behavior observed in some Arabian Gulf students. When the focus group was asked about the effect of lost face caused by a teacher on their feelings and potential negative behavior, responses included:

*“If he (the Arab student) doesn't understand and he thinks that he is right and the teacher is wrong it can lead to that”*

However, this was tempered by the statement:

*“If he understand that what he is doing is wrong that wouldn’t lead to that”.*

If this is the case, strategies such as cultural awareness training, as a part of the induction process for Arabian Gulf students and staff, may be beneficial within the AMC context. This may also help them to accept class rules as enforced by teachers.

According to the focus group, Arabian Gulf students do not have difficulty in accepting the authority of a teacher. Statements such as:

*“Back home we just look at the teacher in class... no one will say anything to him”  
and “You are my teacher I am your servant”*

tended to confirm this view. An interesting outcome of questioning in this area was the student’s response to the casual nature of teacher student relationships at AMC. The focus group expressed surprise and some disappointment at this through statements such as:

*When I came to Australia, here I was surprised because here a teacher in Australia, they call a teacher by his name and they are more friendly, they make jokes and everything.” (sic). “but sometimes you see funny things in class. Students wouldn’t respect the teacher they just do whatever they want and the teacher sometimes he just ignores it. That disturb us sometimes. (sic).*

Although the authority of the teacher at AMC was acknowledged by the focus group, allowing or contributing to racial stereotyping caused offense in this group of students.

Stereotyping according to Taylor (1987) “may be inevitable among those who lack frequent contact with another culture” (p.1) and the way we perceive those from another culture is largely determined by the conditioning that has occurred by the culture of the observer (Kramsch, 1998). Disturbing examples of the manifestation of stereotyping that emerged from the focus group are summed up by the following statements:

*In Pre Sea our class mates used to call us terrorists... it was like a joke....so one time I had a discussion with him and since that day he didn’t call me that... he meant it as offensive ... the other guys, Australian guys actually talked to him and said that’s really offensive don’t say that...some people think that all Arabs are terrorist which is silly to call a man who comes from that area a terrorist its offensive(sic).*

*“...and when we were studying ship security or something the teacher just when he say terrorist look at us... (laughter from the rest of the focus group).. I don’t know why.”*

The discourse between the Arab students and the student support staff was such that cross-cultural issues may have led to some misunderstandings. When the focus group was questioned about their thoughts on female teachers with respect to accepting their authority as staff the following responses were received:

*“ Back home its alright”*

*“it was a surprise for me actually when I came here the English language centre the manager of the English language centre was females .... For me it was a big surprise because I thought it would be all man or something... the teacher they are female as well and sometime, like during Ramadan or something because during fasting you cannot see a woman who is not wearing a scarf, so like sometimes you just put your head down so you can't see them which leads to misunderstanding”*

The first of these responses supports the view of Mehraby (2004) who argues that Western society tends to have an incorrect understanding of the Arabic views regarding gender. The second response indicates that there are wider cross-cultural issues particularly relating to Islam.

Religion appeared to be an important aspect of these Arabian Gulf students perception of ‘self’ (Canning & Bornstein 2001; Mehraby, 2004; Williams, 1998) When the focus group was asked for advice for teachers who were teaching Arabian Gulf students, the advice:

*“Don't say something bad about our religion because we feel it in our heart”*

was quickly offered. When the group was asked whether they had experienced this behavior from AMC teachers the response was:

*“No not at all”.*

Additional advice offered for AMC teachers who were going to be teaching Arabian Gulf students included:

*“Slow down when explaining, use simple English”*

*“...and if you want don't slow down just say to them if you don't understand just come to my office”*

*“Just try to understand a bit of their (Arab) culture in class”*

*“Try to be fair between us and Australians. Deal with us like we are all students”*

When asked whether this group believed that they had been treated unfairly during their Pre Sea training, the response was *“sometimes I have ...3/10, sometimes”*.

## Discussion

The interview process used for this study provided some new insights into the way that the participants view themselves and the way in which they had been treated during their Pre Sea studies. From the information provided, the following conclusions can be drawn in the context of AMC and Arabian Gulf Pre Sea students:

These students are motivated to undertake their education in a new discourse community by the promise of a good and well paying career. They accept that they will be immersed in a foreign culture and language and tend to adapt to this culture where this does not conflict with their core values such as their community view of self and religious beliefs. It is also apparent that AMC staff and students can, and have caused loss of face. In some cases offense through what may be considered by the students as inappropriate approaches to class rule enforcement and by racial stereotyping. This may have contributed to the unexpected behavior displayed by one intake of Arabian Gulf students. These students accept the authority of teachers regardless of gender, but are surprised that the teachers are not respected by some Australian students. The group also gave the strong impression that all students must be treated equitably in and out of class. The provision of some form of cross cultural awareness training for AMC teachers would help to ensure they were better equipped to address this issue. The AMC would benefit from a continuing policy of post Pre Sea course interviews with Arabian Gulf students, in order to obtain feedback on student experiences within this discourse community. Expanding this investigation in order to collect data from Pre Sea students studying in other Australian MET institutions would provide valuable triangulation and increase the sample size for this area of investigation.

## Conclusion

Whenever there is communication between two discourse communities Scollon and Scollon (2001) has offered an important observation relating to discourse between cultures.

One dimension on which there is complete agreement, however is that virtually any communication will have both an information function and a relationship function, when we communicate with others we simultaneously communicate some amount of information and current expectations about the relationship between or among participants. (p. 151).

There is always scope for finding ways to improve communication and relationships between members of different discourse communities. Intercultural communication is now a reality in the area of MET. The shift from Anglo European seafarers towards the east (McAree, 2000) is well established and will result in increasing numbers of students from this region in Australian MET institutions. Now is a good time for teachers involved to engage with these students and learn what is required to provide what is perceived to be a safe and equitable learning environment, free of stereotyping and sensitive to actions that may cause offense or distress. Surely this will help the students engage in the learning process whether they are from Arabia, China or Vietnam.

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