Beef and Lamb, Chicken and H**
Censorship and Vocabulary Teaching in Arabia

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Most English teachers working in the countries of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council, comprised of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) will probably at some point in their careers have heard the word haram (forbidden under Islam) from their students while dealing with certain topics in the classroom. The continued use of ‘mainstream’ English language course books, such as Cutting Edge, Headway and Interchange, especially in higher education in the region, means that teachers and students will encounter lexis relating to issues that could be considered ‘unsuitable,’ ‘un-Islamic’ or ‘against the local culture and traditions.’ This could range from the simple inclusion of words such as ‘beer’ or ‘ham’ in a basic food and drink lesson to the mention of ‘dating,’ ‘kissing’ or ‘cuddling’ in a unit on dating and romance. How each individual teacher deals with such issues will depend on many factors: their rapport with their students, the guidelines set by the management of the institution where they are teaching, the political and cultural situation in the country where they are working, their own previous teaching experience or their own beliefs about the purpose of English teaching and the role of culture. However, what cannot be denied is that for those who get this wrong in the classroom, the ramifications can be very serious indeed.

This article will examine the issues surrounding censorship in vocabulary teaching in the GCC. Based on a quantitative enquiry into students’ attitudes towards culture, religion and English teaching in the United Arab Emirates, and an ongoing qualitative enquiry into ‘native-speaker’ teachers’ attitudes towards the local culture and how it influences their teaching, it will outline the areas of potential conflict and how these can be dealt with in the classroom. At a time when the internet, satellite television and the growing cosmopolitanism of the region means that students are faced with daily exposure to culturally sensitive issues outside of the classroom, the persistence of a censorial approach to the teaching of vocabulary in higher education in the region is an area of interest for all those involved.

**A Steep Learning Curve**

For those who have spent any length of time teaching English to adults in the countries of the GCC, it rapidly becomes clear how easy it is for teachers from a Western background, with no experience of teaching in the Muslim world, to inadvertently cause offence to local norms and taboos. In the vast majority of cases, such ‘slip-ups’ are dealt with without any serious ramifications. Usually the students will explain to the teacher what the offence was; the teacher will apologise and, having learned a valuable piece of information, carry on with the lesson.

My own first slip-up occurred a couple of months after first arriving in the region in the mid-1990s. I had prepared a ‘pop quiz’ vocabulary test to revise the words the class had studied during the week and, to make it more relevant to my students (who all worked at various oil companies in Kuwait), I had written a series of gap-fill dialogues using what I thought were Arab names for the speakers. Unfortunately, as I had several students whose names began with ‘Abdul’ (such as Abdul-Aziz and Abdul-Kareem) and several students called ‘Bader,’ I thought it would be a good idea to name one of the characters ‘Abdul-Bader.’ I handed out the test and for the first couple of minutes there was silence, but then a hubbub started and before I knew what was happening most of the class was shouting and my tests were being waved angrily in the air. Eventually one of the students calmed the others down and explained to me what I had done. He told me that the suffix Abdul means ‘servant of’ in Arabic and should only be used before one of the 99 names of Allah, such as Rahman (Merciful) or Kareem (Generous), whereas the name Bader means ‘full moon’ and to name somebody ‘Servant of the Moon’ or ‘Moon Worshipper’ is totally unacceptable in Islam. The class accepted that I had made the error out of ignorance rather than malice and we carried on with the lesson, although I decided to scrap that particular pop quiz and learnt to be less creative with names in the future.
The Censorial Approach to TEFL

This need for the consideration of cultural issues in the teaching of vocabulary to Arab learners means that, for many teachers who are teaching from books and materials not specifically designed for this part of the world, a censorial approach (Hyde, 1994, p. 297) towards certain lexis in the class is usually adopted. This can involve the simple substitution of haram lexis for inoffensive lexis (saying 'Pepsi' instead of 'wine' when the latter appears in the course book, for example), the omission of certain pages or units of the course book that contain controversial topics, or the time-consuming production of new materials that the teacher considers more suitable to local conditions. This censorship can also be imposed by management, as I found out on my first day in Kuwait in 1994 – a day spent in a cupboard stacked full of hundreds of copies of *Headway*, armed with a pack of black marker pens and a list of pages that needed pictures or words blacked out before they could be handed out to the (adult) students.

For many experienced teachers in the region, taking a censorial approach to teaching is seen as an exercise in common sense and self-preservation, loath as they would be to put their comparatively lucrative jobs at risk by dealing with potentially controversial issues. However, when a censorial approach is taken to extremes, it can result in classes and teaching materials that have been so stripped of anything remotely interesting that they can prove highly demotivating both to teachers and students alike, as my own experience teaching in-house foundations-level materials at a university in Saudi Arabia in the late 1990s showed. When the use of supplementary materials is banned and the class is forced to struggle through extremely dry, technical materials that strip the language of any cultural spice or interest, it is hardly surprising that behavioural problems arise, both amongst students and teachers.

Teachers are caught up in what Findlow (2001) describes as the struggle between “ideals and pragmatics” (p. 51) that she says affects all Muslim educational institutes in that they do not want to present anything that conflicts with the tenets of Islam while at the same time they need to acquaint students with the information they will need to help their countries compete in the global market. And, as the majority of English teachers in higher educational institutes in the Gulf are neither citizens of the countries in which they are living, nor Muslims, knowing where the line is between the permissible and the forbidden can be so complex that many tend to err on the side of extreme caution. When given the choice between providing dull, uncontroversial lessons and using materials that might prove a little more challenging, but carry the risk of stirring controversy, it is the rare teacher who will take the latter course.

Several writers have attacked this censorial approach to English language teaching, seeing it not only as patronizing, but also as not serving the students’ interests in that it presents an incomplete view of the language. Hyde (1994) points out that in censoring what they teach, teachers are appointing themselves as guardians of the language, not taking what the students may think about the issue into account, and he continues to argue the pointlessness of censorship in a time when the world is undergoing a “global information technology revolution” (p. 297), exposing the students to Western culture as never before. His advice that “the ideological nature of language learning needs to be confronted, not avoided” (p. 302) may well have been appropriate for Morocco in the early 1990s when he was writing, but this could now be seen as a perilous route to take for a teacher in a region where specific warnings from management to avoid controversial issues are commonplace. This idea of confronting the ideological nature of language learning is taken up by Kumaravadivelu (2008) who, writing in California, states that

the task of promoting global cultural consciousness in the classroom can hardly be accomplished unless a concerted effort is made to use materials that will promote learners to confront some of the taken-for-granted cultural beliefs about the Self and the Other. (p. 189)
Encouraging students to confront aspects of their own culture’s beliefs may indeed be an excellent way of raising their global cultural consciousness, but it is a course of action that even the most experienced and skillful teacher would treat with utmost caution when working in the countries of the GCC.

So what is the result of the censorial approach to English teaching in the Gulf? Dahbi (2004) sees classroom teachers of English trying to distance themselves and their teaching from the culture and the speakers of the language they are teaching [with] … English becoming a language that cannot be associated with the daily lives of real speakers with homes and habits and traditions, with feasts and rituals, with religious beliefs and a national history. (p. 629)

This distancing of English from the so-called ‘native-speaker’ culture could be said to have accelerated in many English classrooms in the Muslim world since the events of September, 2001. As Dahbi (2004) points out, there has been a growing view amongst some writers in the Muslim world that English had become “a major cultural weapon that has been used by the West to impose its domination [and that] … the time has come for Muslims to use it to resist Western influence” (p. 629). Anglo-American dominance and power over the past 200 years has led to calls for a form of English stripped of its ‘corrupting’ cultural baggage. Recognising both the reality of English as the world’s current lingua franca and the impossibility of its removal, there has been a movement to adopt and adapt the language to resist the influence of its original speakers. In the Muslim world, calls for an Islamicised form of English go back to the first edition of the *Muslim Educational Quarterly* when Shafi (1983) called for an Islamic approach to TEFL “based on the Islamic faith, thought and conduct and excluding anti-religious and irreligious ideologies” (p. 34). However, rather than an Islamic form of English, what has actually been taught in much of the Muslim world is a truncated English, stripped by timid teachers of potentially controversial words, phrases and topics.

For teachers coming from a liberal, secular Western background such timidity could also come from a form of multicultural cringe; having studied the participation of the English language in the sins of Orientalism (Said, 1978), linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) and its role as gatekeeper (Pennycook, 1998), including or excluding people all over the world from access to employment, as well as criticism of the EFL profession for perpetuating essentialist and reductive (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2004) views of culture, which in turn lead to the racialization and othering (Rich & Troudi, 2006) of students, it is hardly surprising that a censorial approach to teaching is adopted as protection against accusations of this multitude of sins.

Taking a censorial approach means that as well as censoring teaching materials, there is a perceived need for constant self-censorship, making sure that any opinions or personal information that could be seen as haram is not revealed. Criticism can be leveled at this approach because not only does it present an incomplete view of the language, which could disadvantage our students, but it also puts teachers in the position of having to be economical with the truth or evasive when questioned on their opinions of certain issues by their students.

To investigate the level to which using a censorial approach when teaching English vocabulary in the Gulf was justified, in 2006 I conducted a quantitative enquiry into the attitudes of 75 male and female students at the Higher Colleges of Technology in Ras Al Khaimah, UAE, towards the features of English language materials that made them appropriate and relevant to the culture, religion and traditions of English language learners from the Arabian Gulf region. This enquiry into Arab students’ attitude towards English was based on studies done by Mallalah (2000) at Kuwait University, Shaaban and Ghaith (2003) at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon...
and Congreve (2005) at King Fahad University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dharhan, Saudi Arabia. It was also based on the work of Muslim writers such as Al-Faruqi (1986), Argungu (1996), Hussein (1996), Kazmi (1997), Karmani (2005) and Ratnawati (2005) on the issue of Islam and English language teaching in the Muslim world. As the enquiry was conducted only in English, all the respondents were students who had already passed the IELTS test at a Band 5.5 or above.

**Language, Culture and English Teaching**

Some of the questions asked relating to culture and English teaching can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1. Students attitudes to culture and English teaching.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think that it is very important to study the culture of English-speaking countries when studying the English language.</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would want my children to be able to speak English.</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it is important that Muslim students should have Muslim English teachers.</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think that English materials should be sensitive to the culture in which they are used.</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think that English text books should be censored before being taught in the Gulf.</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, NO = No Opinion, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree*

The results reveal part of a quandary facing English teachers in the region. 88% of the respondents indicate that they think it is important to study the culture of English-speaking countries, yet none of them disagreed with the censoring of English text books. As to whether it is important for English teachers to be Muslims, which 28% of the respondents agreed with, the comments written included the following: “Yes, because some teachers, who are not Muslims, their behaviour with the students is against the religion.” “It’s OK if they respect our culture and religion” and “It’s not about who teaches it, it’s about how capable the teacher is.”

So, respect for the local culture and religion, judicious censorship of teaching materials and, most importantly, an understanding of which issues could be regarded as offensive, un-Islamic or disrespectful is required for successful teaching in the region. However, as will be discussed in the next section, for the non-Muslim English teacher, understanding what is and what isn’t haram is by no means a simple task.
What is *Haram*?

Martin (2003), in her description of arriving in the Gulf for the first time noted that at her university:

> As the faculty were being initiated into a world of high tech, two or three of the support staff were diligently and attentively blacking out whole passages and dialogues from familiar ESL texts. The surprised faculty pored over the blackened boxes, trying to recall exactly what offensive words or phrases had been deleted: “Halloween,” “Valentine’s Day,” “alternative lifestyle,” “homosexual,” and a reference to a “father cooking.” Listening and reading passages that touched on dating, romance, teen culture, art, drama, popular music, or movies and all discussion topics that questioned the status quo vanished under the censors’ thick black markers. The removal of the usual topics that spark exchange and allow students to practice oral skills was clearly going to tax our creativity. We were reminded that sex, politics, Israel, and religion were taboo subjects. (p. 51)

For a Western English teacher like Martin, the removal of the ‘usual’ topics often means a radical rethink of teaching methods and materials is required to make them better suit local conditions. However, knowing where to start is further complicated by the fact that, on many major issues, there is a lack of agreement both amongst the students and in wider Muslim society itself about what is and what isn’t actually haram. Indeed, for the novice teacher in the region the learning experience can sometimes resemble what could be called ‘tiptoeing through the minefield’ — never being sure whether a word or a topic could be offensive or whether a lesson that worked fine with one class will prove offensive to a student in another class. Any illusions about a monolithic Muslim culture setting down immutable ‘dos and don’ts’ are soon shattered by the multiplicity of opinions and beliefs held in any typical class.

This lack of knowledge amongst Western teachers does not go unnoticed amongst the students, presenting as it does a powerful weapon to use against the unpopular or the incompetent. Consequently, the usual reaction of a teacher upon hearing the word haram from a student is to change the subject and move on to a less controversial (and probably less interesting) area, even though the majority of the class may well disagree with that particular student.

Researching the *Haram*

Based on a list of un-Islamic subjects highlighted by Argungu (1996) in English books, with a couple added from my own experience, I asked the students to indicate whether they thought such subjects should never be included in English classes in the Gulf, if they could sometimes be included or whether it was OK to include them. I also left a space after each subject for the respondents to add comments. The results, in descending order of those that should never be included, can be found in Table 2.
Table 2. Students attitudes to subjects appropriate for the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>OK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pictures of people in revealing clothing (shorts etc.)</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information/maps about Israel</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food that is not halal (pork/bacon)</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking and alcohol</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating, boyfriends/girlfriends</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing and parties</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian beliefs/attitudes/festivals</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarettes and smoking</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music and songs</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism and materialism</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from the results, for none of the categories is there outright agreement and the level of caution that a teacher needs to use over controversial topics can vary greatly from class to class. However, it only takes one student to take offence and complain to put the teacher in a difficult, and potentially job-threatening, situation.

It should be pointed out that 84% of the students who did this survey were female while only 16% were male, and when the results for this question on the suitability of all of the subjects in English class are separated by gender, we get the results in Table 3.

Table 3. Differences between male and female students’ attitudes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>OK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This would seem to suggest that for teachers working at women’s colleges, there is a higher probability that they will encounter issues that their students find problematic than for their colleagues working at men’s colleges.

Some of the issues

Pictures and clothing. Pictures are an invaluable tool for the teaching of vocabulary and modern course books are usually full of colourful illustrations and photos. However, as the results above show, pictures of people in revealing clothing was the issue that was found most objectionable. As one respondent stated, ‘This is what we see every day on the streets and in the malls, etc., and we don’t need to see it in English class as well.’ This
can prove challenging for the teacher who wants to teach the vocabulary of clothing, for example, and the use of flashcards, illustrations in course books or online images needs to be carefully considered. For the novice teacher in the region this could be problematic as their view of what consists of modest, inoffensive attire could differ greatly from that of their students. Despite this issue being the one most respondents thought should not be brought up in class, the comment that ‘this is OK because students need to learn about other countries’ cultures and clothing’ shows that even on this issue there was a lack of agreement.

**Israel.** One of the more startling aspects of working in the Arab world for Western teachers can come from comments made about Israel and the Jews by the students. Little can prepare for the degree of vehemence that even the slightest mention of the Jewish state can produce, and many teachers soon learn that this is a subject to be avoided at all costs. Although reading about and discussing current events are fairly commonplace ways of introducing and practicing vocabulary in class, this is an area that can arouse such strong feelings that its avoidance helps not only to reduce the risk of offending, but also the risk of being offended. One of the respondents in the survey wrote that ‘Israel does not exist in Arab and Muslim’s mind maps’ and it was noticeable that the word ‘Israel’ had been crossed out on seven of the questionnaires, and that the box to indicate that this subject should never be talked about in class had been ticked with much more force than for other issues, even breaking through the paper in a couple of cases. It should be noted that for management, as well as for teachers, care should be taken with teaching materials, course books, library books and even world maps to put on classroom walls, to ensure that Israel is not mentioned. This may strike some as taking the censorial approach too far, but experience has shown that this is an issue that can cause great problems for teachers and managers alike.

**Alcohol and food that is not halal.** Forbidden food and alcohol, along with sex, religion and politics, are the more obvious subjects to avoid, and most teachers are warned about these during orientation sessions upon their arrival in the region. However, although over 60% of the respondents indicated that they thought these subjects should never be mentioned in class, there were a surprising number of comments indicating a contrary view. On the subject of non-halal food one respondent commented “The fact that it is taboo and we shouldn’t eat it certainly doesn’t mean that we can’t learn about it,” while another added that “It helps students when they plan to travel abroad.” On the subject of alcohol came the comment “It’s part of the world that we live in so we can learn about it – No problem!” This can be a particularly difficult area for teachers as standard EFL textbooks often contain references to alcohol and pork products. Although Oxford University Press have recently brought out the *Headway Plus* series especially for the Muslim world which gets rid of such references, they are still fairly commonplace in other materials.

**Dating and boyfriend/girlfriends.** This is an area which again brought up some stark contrasts in the comments made by the respondents and, like food and alcohol, is one which is fairly common in mass-produced English language teaching materials. The comments ranged from “This is absolutely not appropriate to our culture and should never be mentioned in class,” through to “It’s OK to learn about other culture’s perspectives on relationships and compare them with the UAE” to “Without it, life is nothing.” Often teachers may find that their students, like young people everywhere, are very interested in this subject, but it is an area where a degree of self-censorship is called for. The use of autobiographical stories to introduce vocabulary is a useful teaching tool, but for teachers coming from the West where attitudes towards dating, cohabitation and pre-marital sex can differ greatly from those of the Gulf region, it is usually best not to disclose too much.

**Christianity/religion** – One of the major warnings issued to teachers working in the Gulf is not to talk about religion, yet this can be difficult when living and working in a part of the
world where religion affects every aspect of life to a much larger degree than is common in many parts of the teachers’ homelands. However, as one respondent summed up, “After long thinking, I think it is important because it will increase the students’ knowledge, but it should be limited and not touch Islam.” The caveat that any discussion of religion should “not touch Islam” highlights the sensitivity of the subject in a region where proselytising of any religion other than Islam is illegal and not tolerated by the authorities. This issue may also call for a degree of ‘economy with the truth’ from teachers coming from a secular background who are agnostic or atheist because admission of such a lack of beliefs is fairly uncommon in the Arab world. They may find that, when directly questioned about their religious affiliation, it is better to say ‘Christian’ and leave it at that. As to specific religious words such as ‘church,’ ‘temple,’ ‘cross,’ etc., they are rarely problematic in class, unlike some of the food and drink words.

Music and songs. Given the ubiquity of music in the region, where every coffee shop has a blaring TV and canned muzak can be heard in the modern shopping malls, it can often come as a surprise to novice teachers to the region to encounter resistance to the use of music and songs in the classroom. The fact that under a quarter of the respondents considered that music should never be used in English class highlights the lack of agreement on this issue. Songs and music can be invaluable tools for the teaching of vocabulary, and often the objection to the use of music comes only from an individual or a small group. It may be prudent to offer students the option of remaining in the class or leaving for the duration of the song if you are going to use music as a part of your teaching. One of the respondents, a trainee teacher on the Bachelor of Education program, pointed out, “I find teaching songs and music non-problematic with children, though some religious adults find it annoying.”

At the bottom of the questionnaire one respondent wrote: “I think it is OK to include these subjects in terms of acquiring general knowledge about other cultures. However, their advantages and disadvantages should be identified and not mentioned in a way that may influence Muslims.” As teachers in the region it is incumbent upon us to quickly familiarise ourselves with the local culture and religion and use that information to inform our teaching.

Conclusion

Teaching English in the Gulf can be an incredibly rewarding experience, but for some it can be a less than happy one. Favourite lessons that have always worked well in other parts of the world can come to a crashing halt if they include subject matter that the students find objectionable. However, by careful study of the local culture, traditions and religion, the building of good rapport with the students, a realization that you are not dealing with a homogenous group but numerous individuals who may hold greatly differing opinions, and the use of local colleagues to advise you on what may, or may not, cause potential problems in class, you can produce successful, relevant vocabulary lessons and enjoy the experience of teaching in such a fascinating part of the world.

References


