

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE: COPING WITH A NEW CULTURE

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*In addition to trying to prevent people from misjudging me and give them opportunities to appreciate who I am, I needed to learn how to adapt to and integrate in their culture. One of the strategies I use is observation. I spend a lot of time observing what people say/do, how they say/do it, and why. Not until I see a pattern in the use of a certain cultural or linguistic aspect that I start to use it.*

### **Introduction**

Living away from home can be difficult as we have to adapt to and sometimes adopt new cultural settings and social norms to be able to function in the new context and mingle with the people of the new culture. This may be stressful and sometimes frustrating when we see that many of our cultural customs and paradigms are not applicable in the new setting. In order to understand and interact with people of the new culture we have to learn what, how, and why they say and do what they do. We need to learn (or at least understand) their way of life so that we can effectively communicate with them, understand their feelings and intentions. The communication assumptions and criteria we brought from home may or may not be compatible with the new culture, and therefore we need to be broad-minded and flexible. In this article I will share my story of coping with the culture from which comes the language I have been studying for a long time, namely the American culture. It was thrilling to know that I would be studying in the US. I thought now I could practice and improve my English and get to know its culture.

### **Coping with the New Culture**

Having traveled quite a bit to other countries in the past (e.g., UK, Canada, India, Malaysia, Thailand, Kuwait, Bahrain) coming to the US was a somehow similar experience in terms of making all travel arrangements. Also, my experience as a student in the UK provided me with some basic overview of the English language culture. I was not afraid of coming to the US because my level of English gave me confidence that I would be able to interact and mingle with the American culture. Additionally, through the various media sources, such as, television, radio, newspaper, internet, I became aware of

what to expect as a student at an American university and as a resident in an American community. Still however, theory is different than practice. We may know how things work but are not able to implement them. A football coach knows how players should play on the field but he or she cannot play. I will now share with you some of the experiences through which I learnt new things about the social features of the American society. My ultimate aim of telling you about my cultural adaptation story is to encourage curriculum writers, schools, teachers, parents, and all members of the American community to take the multiculturalism and multilingualism as core issues to be addressed both at school level and at the community level.

As a middle eastern I felt that socialization into the new culture was not as easy as for students from other countries. Many people have misconception about people from the Middle East are uncivilized, aggressive, possessive, and bossy. One way I used to prevent people from misjudging me was to avoid telling them where I come from before they had a chance to know more about me. Some, however, could immediately guess that I am from the Middle East. I try to give them first good impression about myself and avoid talking about my nationality and religion. Once, I was online on a yahoo chat with somebody from Des Moines, Iowa. The first couple of minutes went well until I told them I was from Oman, a small county in the Middle East. Immediately the chat session ended without asking me further questions or even saying goodbye. It was that simple! Just because they knew I was from the Middle East, they were probably terrified that they were talking to a person from that part of the world.

In addition to trying to prevent people from misjudging me and give them opportunities to appreciate who I am, I needed to learn how to adapt to and integrate in their culture. One of the strategies I use is observation. I spend a lot of time observing what people say/do, how they say/do it, and why. Not until I see a pattern in the use of a certain cultural or linguistic aspect that I start to use it. In other words, I always wait until I see the same thing said/done by different people before I start saying/doing the same. Cultural/linguistic patterns provide assurance of shared acceptability of usage among members of the society.

The socio-linguistic aspect (that is, what to say/do, to whom, when, and how) of cultural adaptation/integration appears both when interacting with the members of the society informally and also in formal setting such as communicating with colleagues and professors. One example that illustrates such phenomenon is the pragmalinguistic failure (that is, the use of an inappropriate language structure in a particular context usually due to language transfer from mother tongue to the second language) that happened when I

emailed a professor of mine asking about the result of an exam I took with them. The professor's response to my inquiry about the result was that they would find time and score my exams as soon as possible. So, I wrote back "Thank you Dr.x.I'm waiiiiiiiiiiiiiiting". Dissimilar to how rude this may sound in the US culture, in the Omani culture the above response conveys respect and appreciation for that person. In the Omani culture it means something like "Thank you for trying to find time to attend to my issue. I can and will wait for until I hear from you". Fortunately, my professor was linguistically and culturally diverse. Despite their unhappiness with what I said, they were understanding and appreciative of my culture when I explained to them the meaning of what I said in the Arabic language and culture.

One of the differences in the academic environment is the role of the teacher and the role of the students in the teaching-learning process. Although rapidly changing, still educational system in Oman places greater emphasis on teacher control of the teaching-learning environment. For somebody coming from such educational system it is too much to be asked to read a 20-page chapter for next class session and write a reflection of what I liked most, new things I learnt from that chapter, and the challenges I faced as I read or things I needed more clarification on. This was one of the challenges for me as a student in the US. I had a very difficult time getting the reading done for the next week. I was used to a learning environment where the teacher would come and "teach" and students take notes and then go home read the "taught" materials and answer some questions as homework assignment. Even when students are asked to prepare for next class, this usually means just skimming the materials and writing few notes. In addition, I found the amount of reading to be done for next class cumbersome. So, in my attempt to cope with such a challenge, I only read the first few lines and last few lines of each section and the conclusions. I was a slow reader and so I needed some strategies to help me read faster in a second language.

A good example of coping with the culture at the informal everyday life is the difference between how people greet each other. In Oman, people greet each other for a prolonged period of time when they meet each other, especially if they know the person. When I first came to Cedar Falls, August 2001, it took me time to get used to people just saying "hi", "hello", or at best "what's up?" or "how's it going?" Many times I was tempted to do the Omani way: to ask the person how they are doing and then ask them about the family, kids, and life in general. The greeting could take one-three minutes. At first, I thought people here at too busy to stop and have a short greeting chat with each other or maybe do not want to be too close to others so that they don't get involved personally with them. I had to convince myself that people are not being unkind to me; it is just the way they greet each other.

Here is one more cultural/linguistic difference. I lived on campus in Campbell Hall. I arrived on campus a week earlier because I wanted to settle down and get organized before the semester officially started, so I did. It was Sunday morning when in the corridor of Campbell Hall I met three American students who were very welcoming. They asked me about my name and where I came from. Then they asked me if I played any sport. "I play football" was my reply. They told me that they would play football in the afternoon and that I was welcome to join them. In Oman, I play football at least 3 times a week and so I thought this would be one thing I would certainly not miss while I am here. "We'll play at 4 pm, this afternoon", one of the students said. So, 4 pm I put on my football shoes and peeked out of room to see if people had gathered in the corridor as they agreed this morning. They had! BUT! They seemed to be wearing something totally different than what a footballer should wear. They looked huger than I saw them in the morning. They had a ball that looked like a small watermelon, oval in shape! I immediately thought that there was definitely some misunderstanding, and apparently linguistic misunderstanding. It was all about the difference between "football" and "soccer" in American English. I explained to my new friends that I did not play "American football" but I play "football", i.e. soccer! Anyway, they told me that it was actually a less violent version of American football, they call it soft football where you have to pull off some strip without needing to get into physical contact with the opponent. I tried it that afternoon and it was so much fun.

The story of cultural adaptability goes on and on. Last, but not least, there is a difference between the way you offer something to somebody here in the US and the way it is done in Oman. The Omani tradition is to invite and insist that the other person accept the invitation. The other person is expected to deny the offer for once or twice to show that they are not greedy, whereas the inviter should repeat the invitation at least up to three times so that the invitee will accept probably from second or third time. This is because it is impolite and greedy for somebody to accept an offer from the first time.

### **Conclusion**

As I learned how to adapt and adjust to the new culture I started to accept and enjoy life. Although I missed the food back home, I liked the diversity in food here. I enjoyed American, Chinese, Mexican, Italian, and Japanese food. I also became very understanding of people's customs and behaviors and that sometimes there are many ways of doing the same thing. All we have to do is to listen to and respect other cultures. Tough I miss home a lot, I know that I will miss and cherish the indelible memories of my travel for the rest of my life. I believe that it is very crucial for school social studies curricula to

incorporate the concepts of diversity, multiculturalism and multilingualism early in the schooling system. Children need to be exposed to opportunities through which they learn about other countries' cultures, traditions, histories, languages, and geography.

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