'Shababbery' and 'banattitude': Western ELT professionals' perceptions of the role of gender in English-medium higher educational institutions in the Gulf

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Introduction

The title of this article, 'shababbery and banattitude', is based on words I invented during the years I spent working in English language teaching (ELT) in countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). As a male teacher of British background I have, since 1994, taught mixed-gender classes of Kuwaiti oil workers, large, all-male classes of Saudi college students and all-female classes of Emirati college students; in the process I was exposed to a range of gender combinations and was accustomed to the type of gender-related comments that would be commonly aired in the teachers' room by my colleagues.

Based on the Arabic word *shabaab* (= lads/young men), I use the word 'shababbery' to describe the phenomenon that can occur when a class of all-male Gulf Arab students are either testing the boundaries of a new teacher, or exploiting the perceived weakness of an existing one, often resulting in a lot of shouting, banging of desks and general hubbub. For teachers newly arriving in the region, whose preconceptions of the behaviour expected from students in higher education have been shaped by experiences in mixed gender classes elsewhere in the world, this can come as something of a shock and negatively affect their perceptions of their students.

Based on the Arabic word *banaat* (= girls/young women), 'banattitude' describes what may occur when a class of all-female Gulf Arab students take a dislike to a teacher, often resulting in behaviour designed to express this dislike, such as constant talking at the same time as the teacher, complaining about having to do any tasks in class or homework, and the use of laptops/mobile phones during class. Again, this may lead to negative perceptions of the students and impact upon both teaching and learning.

The participants

Although the two terms mentioned above are somewhat frivolous, I use them to convey some of the gender-related issues perceived as problematic by the participants of this study: English language teachers working in single-sex colleges and universities in the countries of the Arabian Gulf, a part of the world where gender roles could be said to be more starkly defined than elsewhere. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to investigate how gender-related issues are perceived by native speaker ELT professionals working in the region and how they are seen as impacting both on their professional and their personal lives. This article is based on data obtained from a series of interviews carried out across the UAE from February-March 2009 with a group of 35 experienced native-speaker English language teachers, teacher-trainers and managers, working in eleven government-run higher educational institutions around the UAE. The participants had an average age of 47, with an average of just under 22 years' experience in ELT, making a total of over 700 years, half of which has been spent in the countries

of the GCC. The average length of interview was 52 minutes. To maintain anonymity, all the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

As 'native-speaker' ELT professionals, the participants in this study are not only representative of the majority of ELT faculty and management working in government-sponsored higher educational institutes in the UAE (Baalawi, 2009), but could also be said to be the beneficiaries of the 'myth of the native speaker', which Phillipson (1992: 185) refers to as the 'native speaker fallacies' inherent in the prevalent concepts that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker and that there is a need to teach English without the interference of other languages. This myth, Phillipson claimed, was part of a worldwide strategy designed by the English-speaking West to continue the domination established by colonialism, leading to linguistic imperialism, so it follows that native-speaker English language teachers could, under Phillipson's view, be seen as neo-colonialists and imperialists. Indeed, for Kabel (2009), the link is quite clear: "the global spread of English represents a new form of imperialism and the native speaker plays a major role in this" (p. 19). For Kubota & Lin (2006), the myth of the native speaker not only has led to the dominance of the native English speaker and its position as the linguistic model for the construction of students' view of the ideal speaker of English, but also influences hiring practices and leads to native speakers of English having a privileged status in employment. Although there are English teachers working in the universities and colleges of the GCC whose first language is not English, the fact that the majority tend to be hired from Anglophone countries such as the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Ireland etc., could be said to reflect such discriminatory hiring practices.

Moreover, Breckenridge's (2010) analysis of the corpus of the internationally prestigious journals *TESOL Quarterly* and *ELT Journal* reveals an increasingly dominant critical discourse in the literature, which links the native speaker teacher to the concepts of linguistic and cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism. This has arisen mainly from studies investigating the 'native/non-native teacher dichotomy' in ELT, and although this *concept* of the 'native-speaker' English language teacher as privileged, powerful and prejudiced has become increasingly mainstream, as Breckenridge & Erling (2011) point out, in such studies the voices of 'native speaker' English teachers are seldom heard and little mention seems to be made of the multidimensional and multi-layered identities of native speaker English teachers, especially those with extensive expatriate experience.

The context

The academic field researching the role of gender in ELT was traditionally dominated by essentialist, fixed views of gender which focused on differences between the sexes, but over the last fifteen years these views have increasingly been challenged as being "inherently context- and culture-blind because they regard gender as a static, context-free category" (Schmenk, 2004. p. 514). The result has been the emergence of more constructivist views that acknowledge the "historical, political, social and cultural aspects" (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004, p. 383) of the creation of gender roles, with the result being that multiple, often conflicting orientations now overlap and intersect in the field. This shift away from difference-based views of gender and the resultant call for research that recognises the complexity of the role of gender in ELT is summarised by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1998), who state that "individuals may experience the language and gender interface differently in the different communities in which they participate at a given time" (p. 486). Therefore, although early studies looked into the differences between the genders in variables such as speech patterns and academic achievement, more recent studies are situating the issue of gender and language learning in specific social, cultural and political contexts rather than attempting to make generalisations based on gender alone.

Gender and ELT have also been linked to advances in feminism, with Norton & Pavlenko (2004) calling for a feminist critical approach to research which respectfully acknowledges students' and teachers' own diverse backgrounds, while engaging them with "alternative systems of knowledge, values, beliefs, and modes of gender performance" (p. 509). Such studies can, according to Kramsch & von Hoene (2001), investigate the opportunities offered by ELT classrooms for teachers to engage with cross-cultural differences and the social construction of gender and sexuality, and thus to help students develop linguistic and intercultural competence, or multivoiced consciousness.

However, for the ELT professional working in the GCC, such an approach may prove problematic. For example, Davis & Skilton-Sylvester (2004) state that the way forward for research into the question of gender and ELT "requires SLA scholars, applied linguists, and TESOL professionals to expose and transform social injustice through research and pedagogical practices within classrooms, schools, communities, and society at large" (p. 398). For non-Muslim ELT professionals from the major Anglophone nations of the West, this approach appears to suggest engagement in the classroom with issues of gender that have the potential to expose major differences of attitudes, opinions and values between teachers, students and local society in an area that is politically, religiously and culturally extremely sensitive.

The English language classrooms of higher educational institutes in the GCC are places where, due to political and economic considerations, predominantly Western ELT professionals and their Gulf Arab students meet. According to Smith (2008), the countries of the GCC "may be in the process of creating the world's most globalised higher education system ... [one] which is largely built upon standards, systems and faculty imported from Western Europe and North America and which operates almost entirely in English" (pp. 20-21). At the same time, "the Gulf States have explicitly stated as their foreign language objective … [that students] acquire a good understanding of English speaking people, on the condition that the above will not lead to the creation of a hostile or indifferent attitude to the students' Arab/Islamic culture" (Lo Bianco et al., 1999, p. 91). Moreover, as Troudi (2007) points out, literacy in English amongst the workforce is "not only a sign of development but is a key to competitiveness in the world market" (p. 6). Consequently, the GCC countries are actively encouraging English-medium Western higher education for their citizens with the aim of increasing their productivity in the globalized economy of the 21st Century. However, as Dahl (2010) points out, "differences in educational theory and ideology between the two cultures often result in difficulties" (p. 31), both for students and for their teachers.

One issue that may highlight some of the greatest differences between the cultures of the teachers and their students in English-medium higher education in the GCC is that of gender. According to Norton & Pavlenko (2004), gender is "a complex system of social relations and discursive practices, differentially constructed in local contexts" (p. 504), and the faster new ELT professionals in the region gain an understanding of how gender is constructed in the local context and how this relates to their professional and personal lives, the better equipped they will be to deal with any potential conflict or difficulty. The majority of government-run colleges and universities in the GCC are single-sex, and the appearance of the students, be they clothed all in white or all in black, immediately accentuates the separation of the sexes in local society. Once past the potential shock of the appearance of the students, training sessions provided by management and conversations with more experienced colleagues can soon highlight the importance of an awareness of gender roles in Gulf society and their potential impact upon higher education. For teachers from a Western background, the difference between their own perceptions of appropriate gender roles in society and those of their students and the society in which they are now working not only can come as a major shock, but also tends to be highlighted in the

discourses of experienced ELT professionals working in the region as one of the major sources of potential problems in the classroom – problems often identified as being so serious that they may even lead to dismissal or imprisonment.

However, the rapid changes that vast oil wealth has brought to Gulf society means that gaining an understanding of local attitudes towards gender is by no means an easy process, given how radically these attitudes themselves may vary, not just between younger students and their parents' generation, but amongst the students themselves. This lack of certainty is further complicated by what Malik (2012) calls "the West's reduction of Muslim women to pawns in culture wars or military campaigns" (par. 5), leading to a situation where representations of Muslim women in dominant Western cultural discourses may differ greatly from the experiences of Western ELT professionals in the region. There is also the question of how far Western ELT professionals are prepared to accept alternative attitudes towards gender, both in their classrooms and in their lives outside the classroom.

To illustrate one potential source of these differing attitudes, Table 1 below compares the rankings of the seven home countries of the individuals interviewed in this study with the seven countries on the Arabian Peninsula where they have worked. The information in Table 1 is from Hausmann et al.'s (2011) *Global Gender Gap Report 2011,* produced for the World Economic Forum. In this report, 135 countries were assessed according to the role of gender in:

- economic opportunity and participation
- educational attainment
- health and survival
- political empowerment.

Table 1: Ranking of Anglophone and Arabian nations according to the gender gap.

Ranking (/135)	Country
5th	Ireland
6th	New Zealand
14th	South Africa
16th	United Kingdom
17th	United States of America
18th	Canada
23rd	Australia
103rd	United Arab Emirates
105th	Kuwait
110th	Bahrain
111th	Qatar
127th	Oman
131st	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
135th	Yemen

As can be seen from Table 1, there is a noticeable difference between the gender gaps in the home countries of the interviewees and those in the countries where they are living and working. So, for the Western ELT professional, dealing with the potential differences between their own perceptions of what are appropriate and acceptable roles for males and females in society, and the perceptions of their host communities, may be a source of conflict. Indeed, for the respondents in this study, there was both an internal conflict to reconcile their own beliefs and values on the subject of gender with those of the society in which they were living, and the possibility of external conflict when teachers and students with noticeably disparate attitudes towards gender interact in the classroom.

What is normal?

Expatriate ELT professionals moving to a new culture often bring with them fixed ideas of what is considered 'normal', based on their upbringings. For example, when I asked 'Alice', a 35-year-old teacher trainer from England, about her views on the relationship between the sexes in the region her reply seems to indicate that, from her Western perspective, this relationship is abnormal, and she shows her surprise at the extent to which the outward segregation of the sexes amongst Emiratis is perceived to extend into family life:

> Researcher: "You talked a bit earlier about the relationship between the sexes so, how do you feel about the relationship between the sexes in this part of the world?"
>
> Alice: (*Long pause*) "Um …… I think it's a bit silly, myself (*laughs*) … I think it's something you get used to, but at first I was really quite surprised at how divided their lives really are … really surprised … like, to hear that they live in different areas of the house. I was really quite shocked at that. I really thought that behind closed doors they'd really just get on with it, that they'd be normal, but actually they're not."

Alice appears to be suggesting that she initially believed that the segregation of the sexes that is observable in Gulf Arab life outside of the home was merely something that was done in public and that in their private, home lives her students would be what she describes as "normal". By holding a perception of the local attitudes to gender as abnormal and "a bit silly", Western teachers such as Alice may then be tempted to present their own views of gender relations as 'normal' and sensible, thus potentially causing offence to students and creating problematic situations in the classroom.

This way of thinking could stem from a Western view on equality, a view that has developed over the years to the point where equality amongst people, regardless of sex, class, colour, creed or, more recently, sexual orientation, is seen as a positive goal for society and one that has been reinforced by legislation. For many from the Anglophone West, it could be said that this idea of equality is a deeply-help cultural belief (even though in practice it is not necessarily always adhered to), and is perceived by many to be a universal human right; an attitude that can prove problematic when taken to non-Western societies in which Western assumptions and beliefs about equality are not shared. For teachers, this can result in a struggle to equate their deeply-held personal beliefs with the reality of the societies in which they are working – societies where equality of the sexes may be seen in a very different light and what from a Western perspective is perceived as 'sexual discrimination' may be legally and religiously mandated.

In several countries of the GCC, government-run HE institutions are still maintained as single-sex, but the Ministries of Education have decided to employ mixed-sex faculty. One result of this is that for the students, who come from a completely gender segregated school system, higher education may prove

to be their first time interacting with a member of the opposite sex who is not a close family member. As Dahl (2010) points out, in the UAE

> "young men and women rarely interact with people of the opposite sex outside their immediate families, so initially they may be very uncomfortable and unsure about how to act when confronted by a Western man or a female instructor who has uncovered hair and wears clothing considered by their families to be unsuitable for going out in public" (p. 53).

"A sea of black": clothing and gender

This discomfort about appearance is not limited to the students, however. For those new to the region, the appearance of the students can initially be quite intimidating. As 'Gwen', a 46-year-old teacher from England explains:

> "The first few weeks here I was very nervous because I didn't fully understand the nature of the students I was dealing with because they were quite different from what I was used to; so it was quite daunting to go into a classroom where everybody was covered in black and that was a bit of a culture shock."

But for 'Norman', a 36-year-old teacher from England, the appearance and reaction of some of the students at the women's college where he was working was a source of annoyance:

> "What would particularly annoy me, which I never got over, was walking through the corridors of the female campus and a girl would put a file over her face, and on a couple of occasions I stopped that student and confronted them and said, 'You know, if you want to come to college you've got to expect there's going to be male teachers here. I find it incredibly offensive for you to cover your face when you walk past. What do you think I'm going to do? What do you think you're going to do?' I found it very offensive. You know, working in a female college, I found it was very stressful."

When I interviewed Norman, he was working at a men's college, having recently secured a transfer, and said that he was much happier working there, away from the 'stresses' of being a male teacher at a female college. In my own experience, I had often noticed the 'file-over-the-face' phenomenon amongst my female students, but I also noticed that it tended to be applied somewhat selectively: a student could walk past male cleaners and security guards (most of whom were from India, Bangladesh, Nepal or Pakistan) uncovered without any reaction, but upon seeing a male teacher or a male Emirati, would cover her face with her file. Following the suggestion of a colleague, I started to follow his policy of responding to any 'file-over-the-face' incident by holding my tie up in front of my nose, covering a small portion of my face. Although at the time I considered this a humorous and light-hearted way of dealing with such incidents, in retrospect I realise that my action, and the laughter it usually caused amongst the student's friends, could have been interpreted as mocking and disrespectful.

The male Western teacher seems to occupy quite an ambivalent position in Gulf Arab society. On several occasions during my time working at the women's college I encountered fully-veiled students at the local shopping mall who stopped to chat with me. Upon seeing my confusion and attempts to identify them from their voices only, they would normally flip back their *niqaab* (black veil) to show me their faces and say "It's me!", an action that I found quite alarming as I was worried about the reaction of passers-by. As the student's teacher, and as a male in front of whom, in the confines of the women's college, the student felt safe removing her *niqaab*, it appeared to me that I had been granted a privileged position as a 'trusted' male, perhaps akin to that of an older family member. However, as well as the students who would happily show me their faces in the supermarket, there were also students who always wore their *niqaab*; students who never wore one; students who did not wear *niqaab* for the first couple of years of college then started wearing it after they got married; and students who started

college wearing the *niqaab* then later removed them in college – thus reflecting the complexity and lack of agreement amongst the students on this issue.

For Western female teachers, their own clothing may be a concern. When I asked 'Sally', a 39-year-old American teacher, to tell me about her initial experiences in the region, she replied:

> "I remember being really concerned about my clothes, what would be appropriate. That seemed to be a big concern of mine. I wanted to make sure I was dressed appropriately because I'm sure I had it in my mind that if I was wearing the wrong thing then people would think I was a whore, or something, you know (*laughs*) … but around where I lived, you never seemed to see a local or a person who was covered. There were a lot of Westerners and a lot of Indians, so, if I was going out for a walk, I would sometimes wear a sleeveless shirt, not really tight or anything, but after I started teaching I ran into a student once, and he was lovely and talked to me and everything, but I felt unbelievably uncomfortable being sleeveless, so ... I don't do that anymore. But it certainly wasn't that he responded in any way or that. I felt bad, you know, it was all inside me."

Sally's experiences could be said to reflect a fairly common phenomenon for expatriate teaching professionals living in the Gulf: a sense of duality between their working lives, spent surrounded by students and locals in which certain standards of appearance and behaviour may be seen to apply, and their home lives, which may be spent in areas of town, or even in compounds, where, as Sally points out, "you never seem to see a local" and where consequently a different set of standards for appearance and behaviour may be seen to apply. This phenomenon is described by 'Jack', a 55-year-old teacher from England, as "living in a Western bubble", and for Sally, the puncturing of this bubble by her encounter with her student on the streets of her neighbourhood seemed to have had a profound impact on her future behaviour.

Sally's comment that the encounter with the student made her "feel bad" but that it was "all inside me" could indicate an internal struggle between on the one hand, her choice of an item of clothing that she would normally wear back home for a walk on a hot, sunny day with, on the other hand, her mental construction of the student as someone who might potentially consider her as "a whore" for walking around the streets with naked arms. Certainly the student was not showing any external indication of this, although it cannot be known what he was thinking; but Sally's reaction could be said to indicate the complexity that attitudes towards clothing and appearance have on the lives of those working in the region. Sally's choice of the word "whore" could also be said to indicate the depth of complexity that appearance plays in the perceptions of issues of gender and sexuality between her American upbringing and her notions of the Arab/Muslim culture in which she is now living.

Sally's deeply uncomfortable conversation with a student while wearing a sleeveless shirt and Norman's angry reaction to the student who was so insistent on covering her face both hint at the effect that perceptions of different standards regarding appearance, gender and sexuality can have on those working in the region. These perceptions, gained both through personal experiences and the professional discourse of the ELT community in the Gulf, cannot help but shape the working lives of teachers, informing their classes, the materials they teach and the methodologies they use. For Western teachers living in the Gulf for any period of time there is the possibility of the emergence of a psychological struggle between the deeply-rooted 'norms' that they bring with them to the region and the subsequent development of new 'norms' from their working experiences and their daily interactions with students and local colleagues. This struggle can manifest itself in a form of reverse culture shock, a phenomenon that I have encountered and discussed with colleagues: the shock one feels upon returning to one's homeland and encountering clothing and appearances which, although once would have been unremarkable, now appears shockingly immodest.

Attitudes towards gender

As well as appearance, attitudes towards gender can be a source of difficulties for ELT professionals in the region. Sally recounts an incident when a male student had gone to the management to complain about a female colleague who, he claimed, had been standing too close to him in class, making him feel uncomfortable; in his complaint he had also said that it was not right to have a female teaching an all-male class. Her reaction to this could be said to indicate the frustration that can occur when Western faculty are faced with attitudes from students they find difficult to accept, and the conflict that can occur between an automatic urge to disagree and a fear of offending students and placing one's job in danger:

> "Look, I can be understanding. I can be everything I'm supposed to be. But I can't stand that kind of thing. I don't appreciate it … You know, I try to be culturally understanding, but I don't appreciate this .. this … you know (*laughs*) .. I just … Oh!! (*laughs in frustration*) … I'm never going to appreciate that kind of thinking … EVER! I don't like it. I don't value it, you know, but I won't hate the people who do it, you know, I still understand that they're only human … Look, as students get to know me sometimes they'll talk about … um …… women shouldn't be able to do .. whatever. And I just say 'Oh really?' I mean, I just can't go there because I'm too emotionally attached to it or .. um .. I have men in my classes whose sisters can't even go to college. Can you believe that? Still! Yeah, I don't like it. But then others in the class will fight him about it, and I think that's fine, I mean, <u>they</u> have their own things to work out and it's not for me … this big, white Western woman to come in and say how it should be, but .. I'm still human, too, you know?"

Interestingly, Sally equates being culturally understanding with being everything she is *supposed* to be, perhaps indicating a belief that being an educated, well-travelled, cosmopolitan educator carries with it an obligation to be understanding and non-judgemental towards other cultures: a position that can be threatened by overt sexual discrimination and by what she perceives as misogynistic attitudes. Sally's rejection of "that kind of thinking", referring to the strict (and in her mind unnecessary) segregation of the sexes, reflects Alice's comment about relationships between the sexes being "a bit silly", but just as Alice said she got used to this way of thinking, Sally qualifies her outright condemnation of discriminatory attitudes towards women with the caveat that she "won't hate" the people who hold them. And her comment that those who discriminate against women are "only human" could be said to be an example of how many of those working in education in the region deal with such examples of culturally different thinking: by rationalising them. Sally admits that if the students make comments she finds sexist and offensive then she will not deal with them in class as she is "too emotionally attached". For Sally, it seems important that she not directly impose her own 'Western' views about gender roles on her male students, no matter how distasteful she may find their comments about women.

The struggle faced by Sally could be said to illustrate a common quandary faced by Western teachers in the region: a professional desire to educate and raise students' awareness of the wider world while simultaneously ensuring that one is not perceived to be offending the local cultural, traditional and religious norms by stating opinions or exposing the students to ideas that could challenge these norms. This places educators in a position where careful self-censorship is needed. Sally's comments that "but … I'm still human too, you know" could be said to indicate that this is not always an easy matter. However, given the comparatively high financial rewards available to those who decide to work in ELT in the GCC, this self-censorship is understandable given the potential dangers associated with full honesty in the classroom.

This need for self-censorship and a comprehensive understanding of what are perceived to be the differences between local and Western attitudes to gender roles and relationships is made much more

forcefully by 'Samantha', a teacher trainer in her fifties from England with twenty-two years' experience working in the region. In the following extract, replying to my question about what advice she would give to a teacher who was considering working in the region for the first time, she highlights what she perceives as the potential negative results of Western females behaving in a way that does not conform to what she describes as 'local standards':

> "To females I would say that you need to be very wary of local, and by that I mean all Arab, men. And that you cannot behave, even with the most educated – and this is going to sound awfully biased and racist – but you cannot behave, even with the most educated, in the same way you would in the West. Standards *are* different, and if you want to be treated with any kind of respect you are going to have to limit your behaviour; and if you don't limit your behaviour, you … erm … look, you might have a very good time, but your name is going to be mud! And if you are not prepared to limit your behaviour then you shouldn't be coming out here or .. you keep it within the expat community .. and by that I *do* mean the *Western* expat community."

Samantha's admission that her warning to Western females to modify their behaviour when dealing with *all* Arab men is "awfully biased and racist" reflects the struggle mentioned by Sally when trying to reconcile her own values and beliefs with those of the society in which she is now living. Samantha's use of the word 'awfully' seems to indicate a belief in the undesirability of being seen as "biased and racist" by making sweeping generalisations about any group of people, such as "Arab men"; but this concern about being seen as racist appears to be in conflict with her belief, perhaps reinforced by her 22 years spent living in the region, that there are discernible differences in the standards regarding what is deemed acceptable behaviour for women in Western society and in Gulf/Arab society – differences it would be unwise for Western women to ignore.

Samantha appears to realise that by warning Western women to modify their behaviour when interacting with Arab men she is in danger of being deemed 'racist', but still considers it an important enough piece of advice for any female considering moving to the region that she is prepared to give it anyway. It is also interesting that, by couching her comments as "awfully biased and racist", Samantha appears to find herself in a situation where what she thinks and wants to say on the issue is at odds with her beliefs about what it is acceptable to say or think about things – a situation I would refer to as 'multicultural cringe', where a cultural belief that it is wrong and unacceptable to make generalised, stereotypical statements about groups of people, especially those from outside the West, is at odds with her pragmatic belief that Western women should not interact with local men the same way they might with men back home if they wish to maintain any respect. Both Samantha's carefully couched comment here and Sally's earlier comment about being "everything that I'm supposed to be" could be said to reflect a Western discourse of political correctness, a discourse quite common in the ELT field, where both speakers are aware of certain standards of acceptable discourse but seem to find it difficult to equate these standards with their own feelings.

However, despite the perceived need for strict self-censorship and modification of behaviour when dealing with issues relating to gender, it is possible to indicate disagreement without endangering one's job. In the following extract, 'Gerald', a 46-year-old teacher from England, recounts a discussion between his (male) students on the subject of gender roles and explains how he dealt with their comments. Gerald's use of humour to gently (and carefully) mock an attitude with which he does not agree has the advantage of letting the students know his opinion about the matter without directly challenging them – an action that, considering that in this particular case many of the students appear to have claimed religious sanction for their views, could have had serious repercussions.

Gerald: "We were discussing gender issues, gender equality, just two days ago and I had a student saying 'Well, women *have* got smaller brains and *cannot* be in power because of this'; and this caused an argument between one student, who said 'No, that isn't true' and all the others, who were saying 'It's in the Qur'an'. And it got quite … erm … heated; and they're friends and they laughed at the end, but there was a heated atmosphere discussing whether or not it was OK to discuss the idea of women being equal to men, and being better than men in some ways, because they claimed the Qur'an directly said they can't be .. and that's why I'm happy. I'm happy for them to have that discussion .. you know, I'm not trying to convince them one way or the other but I want them to think about these things because I feel that that's important for their country, their role in their country in the future …"

Researcher: "You said that the rest of the class said it's in the Quran?"

Gerald: "Yes, they were saying 'It is written' and 'You can't argue against it'. But what I was doing later in the day was laughing at them when they got stuff wrong, like, really badly wrong, like we were trying to do the Present Simple for the fifty-fourth time and I'm like: 'Here's this massive brain!' (*laughs*) Yeah, I'm like: Be quiet everyone. Here's Majid with his amazing big brain trying to do it for the fifteenth time, you know, it's just basic 'I, you, he, she, it' sort of thing. And they laughed at that, you know, they laughed and were happy to take that."

For Gerald, the fact that only one student out of the whole class disagreed with the statement that women have smaller brains than men and are thus incapable of holding positions of power subsequently becomes a source of humour when juxtaposed with the students' less than successful attempts to deal with what he considers to be a relatively simple area of English grammar. Gerald says that his use of humour has been done in a light-hearted and friendly way which the students have found inoffensive and, as he later pointed out, the joke over 'big brains' had become amalgamated into that particular class's discourse and was subsequently being used by the students as well as Gerald himself – something which could be said to be contributing to his rapport with his students.

Gerald's use of humour to deal indirectly with student attitudes with which he disagrees could also be indicative of a common method of dealing with the frustrations and contradictions faced by Western faculty teaching in the region. Although Gerald asserts that he is "not trying to convince [his students], one way or another" on the subject of women's mental capacities, perhaps his subsequent use of humour to mock his students' inability to deal with the Present Simple could be seen as a way of indirectly and non-confrontationally letting them know his own feelings on the matter. Gerald's denial of any intent to affect his students' opinion, while simultaneously letting them know, through the use of gentle mockery, the fact that he finds their opinions a subject of humour, could be said to highlight one of the methods used by Western teachers to deal with the conflicts and contradictions inherent in teaching in the region, especially where the issue of gender relations is concerned. Teachers such as Gerald are placed in a situation where they have been employed by the government to teach the English language and raise their students' global awareness, but where they feel compelled to censor some of the cultural attitudes that are commonplace in the Anglophone world for fear of coming into conflict with seemingly contradictory attitudes from their students.

Gender as a problem

The perception of 'different standards' between Western and Arab culture regarding gender relations is also an area that was highlighted by the respondents throughout the interviews as a potentially problematic one in the classroom, especially in countries such as the UAE where faculty may be teaching students of the opposite sex. Over the course of the interviews conducted for this study, gender-related problems provided the largest percentage (about 40%) of the incidents highlighted by the respondents

when asked to recount any problems they had either encountered personally, or had heard about, in the classroom. This is not to deny that similar incidents may well occur in any English teaching situation around the world, but the emphasis on appropriate gender roles and behaviour in Gulf Arab society and the potential threat such incidents pose to teachers working in the region make these noteworthy. The gender-related incidents related by the respondents in this study are presented in Table 2 below – note that some of these incidents were narrated 'second-hand', and evidence was not available from external sources about their veracity.

Table 2: Gender-related problematic incidents related by respondents.

Incident	Respondent
A male colleague was transferred from the Women's College to the Men's because a student was sending him sexual emails.	Alice
A female student once took a pen out of a male colleague's pocket and he was 'let go' for 'inappropriate behaviour'.	Betty
A listening book that showed men dressed as women and was deemed 'offensive' by the students was reported in the local press, which caused the dismissal of a couple of managers.	Betty
A male student slapped a female student for daring to sit at the front of a mixed class she was teaching in Yemen. He was expelled.	Betty
Problems in his male class in Saudi Arabia where some 'camp' students were constantly being insulted and attacked by other students.	Brian
He had to deal with incidents of 'gay-bashing' in class with male students who wore eyeliner and 'effeminate' clothes being attacked by other students.	Dudley
A female student complained to the student councillor that he was making her feel uncomfortable because he was standing too close.	Jack
A female student accused a male colleague on a student feedback form of touching her hand. He denied it vehemently and claimed she was being vindictive because of her poor grades.	Jack
A female student wrote a love letter to a male colleague which caused a huge problem with her family. The teacher was moved to a men's college.	James
She had to deal with a male teacher who asked his female students how many Valentine's cards they had received, thus insinuating they all had boyfriends, causing much offense.	Margaret
She had to deal with a male teacher who had asked inappropriate questions about the wedding night during a class discussion on weddings, causing much offense.	Margaret
She had to deal with a female teacher who had made a late (male) student sit in the corner and the student complained that he had been humiliated by a woman.	Mary
A (female) student once slapped him on the knee after he told a joke in a small group in class and the other students shouted 'Haram! Haram!' at them. He was petrified.	Matthew

During a celebration at the Women's college he took photos of the students, which he thought could have been a serious problem.	Ned
A male colleague was fired because in a class photo one of the female students had put her arm around his back.	Norman
He was very frustrated that as a male teacher he was not allowed to help his (female) epileptic student when she had fits in class.	Peter
A female colleague was arrested and imprisoned for having sexual relations with a man out of wedlock.	Sally

Of the incidents reported, 40% of them related to inappropriate touching or proximity and a third concerned matters relating (sometimes distantly) to sex/dating/love. Some of these incidents led to teachers losing their jobs or being transferred to another college, while in one case it led to imprisonment. When incidents such as these occur (or even if they are believed to have occurred), they may add to the professional discourse of the Western ELT community in the region, a discourse that cannot help but be affected by the fear such stories engender. This fear of dismissal may well have a significant influence on ELT in the region, not only on the way teachers behave in class but also on the materials they deem 'suitable' to teach in class, leading perhaps to careful, or even over-sensitive censorship of the issues covered in English lessons. This censorship then runs the risk of disadvantaging students from the region when they are expected to take international English language examinations such as the IELTS or the TOEFL, which may contain cultural references with which the students are unfamiliar.

Shabab and *banat*: attitudes towards the students

For teachers coming to the Gulf from the major Anglophone nations, the segregation of the sexes will often be unfamiliar, and this can affect not only their perceptions of their students but also radically affect their teaching. For 'Peter', a 36-year-old South African teacher, the chance to work as a male teacher in an all-female college is seen as a unique experience:

> "I just find this environment challenging … some days you are just pulling your hair out, but it's pretty unique, you know, when you think about it really, it's a women's college and then you are a man as well, thrown into the whole thing, and you're foreign, you're seen as a Westerner, it's a really unique environment and it really makes you change, you know, you *have* to adapt to it, and I tell myself every now and again: 'Just enjoy it, because you are probably never going to teach in an environment as unique as this again'. (*Laughs*)"

Peter points out the importance of adaptability to survival in the challenging environment of being a male teacher in an all-female college, and the presence of sexually-segregated colleges appears to offer distinct challenges and rewards to the interviewees according to the gender of their students. It was not uncommon for the respondents to have had experience teaching in both men's and women's colleges, or to be part of a teaching couple working at different colleges, and several of them commented on the differences they perceived between teaching males and teaching females. 'Siobhan', a 52-year-old manager from Ireland, commented that

> "Teaching both men and women, I would say, well, the guys were very funny. They made me laugh a lot. They were lazier than the women, probably more self-confident than the females, perhaps with an inflated sense of their own ability, compared to the females."

Her comment on the funniness of the male students reflects Gerald's earlier statement about the importance of humour in his teaching, and her comment on laziness reflects a common thread running through comments made by the respondents regarding male students: a perception that there was a certain lack of motivation and seriousness towards studying amongst male students when compared to females.

'Matthew', a 51-year-old Australian teacher with experience of both women's and men's colleges, points out what he sees as a lack of discipline amongst his male students:

> "Here the discipline at home for boys is minimal or non-existent. They are given a lot of freedom and they do what they like, basically, and I find mentally they do, too. Their minds are all over the place and wander, like one of them makes a comment and they all join in and in seconds you've lost the class."

This perceived lack of home discipline is in stark contrast with the female students, whose lives are seen as being controlled to a much larger degree than their brothers. For those teaching at all-male colleges, discipline, motivation and classroom control are often seen as major issues, although as Gerald and Siobhan's previous comments show, humour is often used as a way of dealing with this.

Matthew continues his comment to compare his current male students with the females he taught before:

> "The women are more focussed here, I've found. Their motivation is higher … because study gives them a way out of the house and gets them into jobs which give them more freedom and independence, and sometimes study is also a way out of marriage. And then there's the other thing – because they're not let out of the college grounds, as you know, they *have* to be there so they may as well do something while they're at the college."

It is interesting to note that for Matthew, his female students' motivation is ascribed to a desire for "freedom and independence", a comment that perhaps stems more from Matthew's own Western cultural upbringing than from the reality experienced by his female students. However, this perception of college providing 'freedom' for female students is underlined by 'James', a 43-year-old Scottish teacher:

> "For the female students, when they leave home and come to college, that's freedom for them. They can come here, they can be with their friends all day and the last thing they want is to be kicked out of college because that means they've lost their freedom; but for the guys, they just want to be out and about in their cars and for them, college is prison … that's one of the big things I've really noticed here. In Europe I never noticed any difference between male and female students, they were just students, but here there is a vast difference between male and female students that I come across."

James and Matthew both stress the concept of 'freedom' when referring to their female students and this could be said to indicate a perception that female students are in some way not 'free'. This may stem from the fact that comparatively few of them have their own cars, unlike the males; the fact that they arrive and depart from college in buses or vehicles driven by male family members; and the high walls and numerous security guards at the female colleges who closely check the students' arrivals and departures and prevent any from leaving without permission from a family member. This perception may also be reinforced by comments from the students themselves, many of whom are dependent on male family members for transport and tend to spend more time at home than their brothers.

However, for 'Peggy', a 36-year-old American teacher, there is a danger for teachers in looking at the female students from such a Western perspective, and seeing them as somehow not being 'free' and 'un-empowered' by the local culture:

> "You know, I do tend to keep away from talking about my culture too much, you know. We have these student evaluations every semester and one of the questions is 'Does your teacher respect you culture?' … One of the teachers who is new here has received comments from several of her students saying she does not respect the culture, and I've heard some of her lessons and it's kinda this: she thinks they're un-empowered and, you know, she's going to introduce material that shows them that women in other parts of the world are this way. And I really don't believe in trying to change them and I don't think that Emirati women are unhappy here for the main part, so I'm not here to change them or change their culture. I'm just here to .. you know .. make learning about English as interesting as possible. So I guess it depends on who you are, but there are certainly a lot of teachers who come here thinking 'These poor women', and I think if you come with that attitude then it's going to be really difficult for you to balance respect for the culture and still maintain your own integrity, without feeling that you've compromised who you are and what you believe in, and I never feel that."

The new teacher who thought it appropriate to introduce materials comparing the position of local women with those elsewhere in the world, perhaps in an attempt to 'empower' them (from a Western perspective), received very negative feedback from her students. These feedback forms are very important in Higher Educational institutes in the region, and a teacher's passing of the initial probationary period or even their continued employment may depend on receiving positive feedback from the students. So for Peggy, any attempts to try and change local perceptions towards women are seen as both inappropriate and potentially dangerous. Although Peggy may hold her own ideas on what is acceptable for women in society, she does not feel the need to impose these beliefs on her students, and indeed seems to indicate a realisation that it would be arrogant to do so, given that the Emirati women she encounters do not appear to be unhappy with their role in their own society. However, she also seems to realise, based on her account of the experience of the new teacher, that any attempt to point out what could be seen as shortcomings in local cultural attitudes to women when seen from a Western perspective could well be perceived as disrespectful by the students, which could pose a threat to her continued employment.

As well as there being a perceived lack of freedom amongst female students according to some of the respondents, such as Matthew and James, there is also a perception of innocence and naïveté. For Norman, his female students were seen as "less worldly" than those he had taught in Europe, saying "they are almost cocooned here". For 'Kevin', a 60-year-old teacher from England, teaching female students was seen as potentially more problematic than teaching the males:

> "I think teaching women you have to be more cautious, because of the culture … and I think the women are more emotional so you have to, sort of, nurse them around a bit more, you know."

The need for caution when teaching female students is ascribed by Kevin both to the local culture and to their alleged emotiveness, and this caution usually takes the form of a strictly censorial approach to teaching, dealing only with topics that hold no potential for causing offence to the local culture, an approach that may be far more common when teaching female students than male.

Kevin's caution with his female students reflects that shown by Peggy, who also works at a women's college, but it does not appear to be such an important issue when teaching males. Kevin continues his comment by describing his male students as follows: "The guys are very laissez-faire – you don't see them after class as they just vanish in the cars and stuff … (*laughs*)", reflecting James's earlier comment

that his male students "just want to be out and about in their cars [because] … for them, college is prison". For teachers at male colleges, it appears that there is less anxiety about potentially causing offence to the local culture. However, as reflected in the following comment by 'Oliver', a 39-year-old teacher from England working at a men's college, the idea of being moved to a women's college is one that causes anxiety:

> "You know, I enjoy being in the classroom here more than anywhere else I've taught around the world, but one of the worries I always have is that one day someone is going to say to me 'We're sending you to the Women's College'."

Indeed, in the women's colleges teachers of both genders seem to be a lot more concerned than those teaching at the men's colleges. For Alice, the reason for this worry comes from local cultural attitudes to women and the college's reaction to them:

> "It seems to me that in this culture where, generally, women are not given any power at all at home, they seem to exercise it whenever and wherever they can; and I think the problem with the way the college is run is that it gives them an avenue to exercise that power, and they exercise it when they don't get the grades they want or to deal with unpopular teachers, and it can get really nasty."

The power that students can exercise often comes in the form of the student evaluation forms mentioned by Peggy, although in more serious cases the students will go higher. 'Cordelia', a 38-year-old teacher from England also teaching at a women's college, talked of a case where "a student got a D on an assignment and it was reported to the Sheikh and it was very worrying" and Alice also mentions an incident when "a student phoned the Sheikh and a supervisor was fired immediately", although in that case the dismissal was later rescinded. The power that female students are perceived to wield could be said to have an effect on the way teachers act in the classroom, the materials they choose to teach and even the grades that they award for their students' work. The fear of negative feedback, or even being reported to the Sheikh, could influence teachers faced with a piece of work that is a potential fail, and may lead to a situation where teachers are awarding grades more out of fear of possible reprisals than the academic worth of the assignment in question.

Despite these issues, several of the respondents expressed a preference for teaching the women, perhaps due to the lack of motivation and interest that was seen as more prevalent amongst male students. For Jack, motivation seems to be a major factor, although even with his current female students he sees it as a problem:

> "I like teaching the women very much here. I didn't like teaching Emirati men. That was not a pleasant experience as they seemed to be very unmotivated, but teaching the women is much more interesting; but it is still quite a struggle to get them to be motivated, it's quite frustrating, the lack of motivation."

However, with the rapid increase in the youth population in the region and the subsequent reduction of the number of public sector jobs available to national males, it may be that motivation amongst male students in the GCC will increase.

Conclusion

To conclude, gender and attitudes towards gender roles could be said to have a major influence on the lives of ELT professionals working in the Gulf region, and how they decide to reconcile their own beliefs on the subject with potentially opposite views held by their students can have a serious impact on their working lives. Those who decide to contest cultural attitudes that they find unacceptable may be putting their jobs at risk, whereas those who choose to avoid the issue and take a censorial approach to their

teaching may run the risk of giving their students an 'incomplete' education. This perceived need for censorship and self-censorship may be conflicting with the need to prepare students for international examinations containing inherent Western cultural bias (Lanteigne, 2004) but, as this study has shown, there is a fear of following Hyde's (1994) recommendation to "explicitly confront… the foreign culture in the classroom" (p. 304). In the context of this study, in which the governments of extremely wealthy countries employ thousands of Western ELT professionals to work under conditions of strict censorship (Findlow, 2006; Picard, 2007; Elyas, 2011), and where trade unions are banned and all foreign faculty are on fixed-term contracts with little job security (Mercer, 2007), it is hardly surprising that such a fear should arise.

This fear may be problematic, leading to what Hyde (1994) describes as the "absurdity of deculturation" (p. 304) caused by censorship, resulting in dull, anodyne lessons that are demotivating for both teachers and students – a situation that may contribute to the sub-optimal performance of ELT in higher education in the GCC, despite the vast sums invested. Although, as Holliday (2011:) points out, "keeping from criticizing a practice because it is 'cultural' can only be patronizing, in assuming that individuals on either side are unable to move on from tradition" (p. 15), the dangers inherent in pursuing the "harsh imperative of contestation" (ibid) regarding cultural issues in the ELT classrooms of the GCC means that the censorial approach to teaching is likely to continue in the region. As Ahmad (2010) points out:

> 'the challenge posed in the Arab Gulf countries is how to … ensure that the type of [English medium] learning responds in an effective manner to the needs of individuals and countries, *without disrupting beliefs and traditions"* (p. 2, emphasis added).

Her emphasis on the potentially disruptive effect of English to local beliefs and traditions is of great importance to native-speaker ELT practitioners in the region, especially those coming from secular Western backgrounds, whose understanding of the cultural role of religious belief and whose attitudes towards the sensitive subject of gender may vary greatly from their students. Although as 'native-speakers' they are increasingly portrayed in critical studies of language education as privileged and powerful, as Baalawi (2008) points out, for many native-speaker ELT professionals in the region there is a perception of working life as resembling that of a tightrope walker, where any mistake (inside or outside of work) can see them plummet to the ground, marking the end of their careers in the host country and their immediate departure.

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