How Teachers, Administrators, and Classmates Perceive Saudi Arabian Students

The following results are based on three studies: one for IEP/ESL instructors, one for program directors, and one for ESL students of intermediate English ability and above. Rather than deal with each survey individually, this presentation merges what we consider to be the most important data using the instructor survey, by far the largest of the three, as a framework. The data for the teacher and student surveys were gathered on-line (http:// surveymonkey.com) during April, May, and early June, 2007. Question format was mixed: yes/no, Likert Scale, multiple choice, open-ended. The director survey went out over the UCIEP e-mail list.

Our purpose was to investigate how classroom teachers, classmates, and administrators perceive and respond to the large numbers of Saudi Arabian Scholarship students. The instructor survey is comprised of nine parts:

I. Demographics
   A. One hundred fourteen (114) ESL/IEP teachers responded, from forty-seven different institutions representing 24 different states
   B. All regions are represented, including Hawaii. According to Dr. Mohammed Aleiisa (2007), Saudi Arabian Cultural Attaché, there were 14,644 scholarship students in the U.S. as of October, 2007. The largest concentrations of Saudi students by region are in
      1. Pennsylvania in the East
      2. Michigan and Ohio in the Mid-west
      3. Florida in the South
      4. California in the West
   In Iowa, the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) has the largest concentration of Saudi students, at 74%.
   C. 72% of respondents are female, 28% are male
   D. All but five teacher-respondents are American citizens
   E. 71% have five or more, and 55% had ten or more years of teaching experience
   F. 77% are between 30 and 60 years old, with the dominant age range between 50 and 60 years old (33%)
   G. Respondents are knowledgeable about Saudi students because 60% indicate that their classroom population had been 50-100% Saudi Arabian during the 2006-2007 academic year. Another 16% had classes that were at least 25 to 50% Saudi Arabian.
II. **Section 1: Feelings and Descriptions**

A. From a professional perspective, how do you feel about *teaching* Saudi Arabian students in comparison to other students?  

(***Likert Scale: 1 = low, 5 = high**)

1. No respondents were “very negative”
2. 20% reported negative feelings
3. Almost 80% were neutral to very positive

B. Based on your teacher-student interactions, which of the following words or phrases best describe your Saudi *male* students?

Note: When asked if they observed differences in scholastic performance between Saudi male and Saudi female students, only 14% said no.  

**Two out of three respondents (67%) saw a big difference**, even though 88% had 10% or less Saudi females in their classrooms.

1. **Definite positive** skew on personality descriptors...
   - friendly: 84%
   - talkative: 82%
   - good sense of humor: 81%
   - polite: 62%
   - rude: 9%

2. **...but a negative** skew on educational descriptors:
   - disorganized: 59%
   - procrastinating: 54%
   - immature: 51%
   - argumentative: 45%
   - smart: 41%
   - lazy: 39%
   - motivated: 31%
   - critical thinking: 12%
   - creative: 10%
   - organized: 6%

C. Based on your teacher-student interactions, which of the following words or phrases best describe your *Saudi* female students?

1. There was a positive skew on Saudi females’ personality descriptors as well as on several of the educational descriptors:
   - motivated: 79%
   - polite: 78%
   - friendly: 75%
   - smart: 67%
   - organized: 51%

2. Respondents considered Saudi females students also low in critical thinking (30%) and creativity (21%), but not as low as the males.
III. Classroom Interaction with Saudi Males
A. Has teaching Saudi male students caused you to change the way you interact with your classes? 59% of respondents said yes (vs. 30% for females)

1. ...how have you changed in the area of teacher to student relationships?
   In rank order, respondents...
   a. are more formal/directive
   b. have stricter standards
   c. do no bargaining
   d. are more friendly
   e. are more teacher-centered, more parental, more conservative in dress
   f. do more preparation for class, have more office time

2. ...how have you changed in the area of discipline and management?
   In rank order, respondents...
   a. are stricter in terms of students following directions and turning in assignments on time
   b. do more monitoring during tests
   c. are careful not to embarrass or hurt egos/do more private correcting
   d. use more over-all discipline (seating charts, breaking up groups)
   e. work at making sure all students have speaking opportunities
   f. appeal to their authority as teacher; are more accommodating
   g. are more teacher-centered

3. ...how have you changed your expectations of student performance?
   In rank order, respondents...
   a. have lowered expectations (24 of 51, or 47%) with an additional 8% (4 of 51) “struggling against tendency to lower expectations”
   b. haven’t changed in this area (21 of 51 or 41%) but 10% (5 of 51) stated or implied that “our % of failure has gone up.”

4. ...how have you changed the way you present material? In rank order, respondents...
   a. are more clear and detailed
   b. use more examples, more materials, more visuals
   c. consider learning styles
   d. are more animated and entertaining
   e. repeat more, are more interactive
   e. go more slowly

5. Have you changed your classroom interactions in any other ways?
   5 of 39 mentioned Saudi verbal behavior, either using it to help the more silent students or keeping them from dominating: “They will dominate class, quite unwittingly, if the rest of the class is mostly Asian. I find ways to insure full participation from all students while allowing the Saudis to verbalize their ideas often.”
B. Which of the changes you mentioned have proven effective? Four themes:

1. **Successful Strategy: Being stricter and more structured** (28 of 45):
   - “Going over homework very carefully before the end of class proven [sic] effective in a sense that I eliminated the ‘I-did-not-understand-what-to-do’ excuses. I made students read the homework assignments. However, it costs me about 5-10 minutes of the class time.”
   - “More structured concrete evaluation tools (rubrics)—less arguing!”
   - “Being extremely clear with expectations and guidelines is vital.”
   - “Have clear rules and follow them.”

2. **Successful Strategy: Developing relationships** (7 of 45):
   - “I have tried to build a rapport... I have found that respect goes a long way in breaking down some of the barriers and resistance—but not in all cases.”
   - “As stated above, developing a relationship of trust, maintaining trust, and insisting on integrity are crucial to success.”
   - The most important thing has been to try very hard to maintain good, friendly relationships with the students by chatting with them outside of class, greeting everyone by name, etc.”
   - “Having them talk to me in my office helps me understand the students and their expectations better.”

3. **Successful Strategy: Being more entertaining, lively, interactive, tactile** (5 of 45)
   - “Presenting material orally and in an entertaining fashion. They love games, particularly games where they can talk.”
   - “…they respond to games and competition.”
   - “I cannot present information and assume that these students ‘got’ it. If I did and moved on, there would soon be problems. Students don’t seem to key in on organizational systems. It is necessary to point them out. They respond better to a lively classroom. NOTE: Overall, I think these changes have made me a better teacher.”
   - “I do see that making my presentations more interactive has had had a good effect in keeping students’ attention—Saudi and non-Saudi. It also seems to reinforce appropriate turn-taking behavior”

4. **Not-so-Successful: Questioning their effectiveness** (6 of 45):
   - “Good question! We are still struggling with effectiveness.”
   - “I am still not sure I am being effective.”
   - “None” [of the changes have been effective]
   - “Lowered expectations! I’ve had surprisingly little luck encouraging critical thinking. They are not receptive and they don’t seem to care.”
IV. Classroom Interaction with Saudi Females
A. Has teaching Saudi female students caused you to change the way you interact with your students? 71% of respondents either said they had made no changes due to female students (53%) or they had no Saudi women students (16.9%). Among those who had made changes, the majority referred to pairing and group activities, shyness, possible discomfort at being taught by male teachers who also are being careful not to touch, be alone with, or be overly friendly with their Saudi women students—social as opposed to educational issues.

B. Comments from the survey:
1. “Only one—she is great. Want to clone her.”
2. “…Saudi females perform more like other international students than Saudi males.”
3. “SA females often times suffer because their male counterparts cannot keep up and the expectations are lowered.”
4. “The only area that I have lowered my expectations with Saudi female students is with their spelling. They struggle with reading and writing, but contrary to Saudi male students, they work really hard and seem to be more committed to their language learning process.”

V. Personal Initiative and Self-Perceptions
A. Tiberius and Billson (1991) in Tiberius and Flak (1999) note that ”shared responsibility for learning” is a “key feature” of the teacher-learner alliance. In your experience, to what extent do your Saudi students take responsibility for their own learning?

1. 84% of respondents found the Saudi males to be three or less on a Likert Scale; (1 = less responsible, 5 = more responsible) 55% rated them at one or two. No Saudi males were rated above four.
2. 93% of respondents found the Saudi females to be three or above on the Likert Scale; 75% rated them at four or five.

B. In your professional opinion, to what extent do your Saudi students accurately perceive their own English language ability? In other words, is there incongruity between their perceived ability and their actual performance?

1. 85% of respondents thought the males’ perceptions were inaccurate
2. 78% of respondents thought the females’ perceptions were accurate

VI. Factors Affecting Saudi Student Progress
A. Do you believe there are educational and/or cultural factors that negatively affect Saudi male students’ progress in the English language classroom?

1. 94% of respondents said yes

“Students do not study or have the appropriate study skills necessary for university level classes. Also, I find that they are unable to think critically or analyze text. Finally, their oral ability is higher... than their reading and writing ability.”

--Respondent
2. Top three factors were
   - lack of reading/writing skills emphasis in L1 (76%)
   - emphasis on rote memorization in educational background resulting in little or no critical-thinking skills (50%)
   - failure to connect English-language ability with academic success (46%)
   - other: answers varied, but 4 of 26 responded that “they may have problems relating appropriately to female faculty”

B. Do you believe there are educational and/or cultural factors that negatively affect Saudi female students’ progress in the English language classroom?
   1. 71% of respondents said yes
   2. Top two factors were (the same as for the male students)
      - lack of reading/writing skills emphasis in L1 (51%)
      - emphasis on rote memorization in educational background resulting in little or no critical thinking skills (45%)

VII. Student Perceptions of Teachers
A. Do you think any of the following affect the way your male Saudi students relate to you? Given five choices (gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and years of experience) respondents ranked their top three as follows:
   1. age 72%
   2. gender 70%
   3. years/exp. 50%
   4. Comments:
      a. “I am a female in my thirties with over 10 years’ experience who has taught in Arab countries. As such, I have gotten respect from my students. However, some young female teachers at my school have struggled to be respected and have had problems with discipline.”
      b. “I feel sometimes like they would respect me more if I were an old man instead of a young woman.”
      c. “To the guys, I’m like ‘Mom.’ They respond to me as an older woman.”

B. Do you think any of the following affect the way your female Saudi students relate to you? Given the same five choices, the top three were...
   1. gender 71%
   2. age 67%
   3. years/exp. 49%
   4. Comments:
      a. “Being a woman positively affects how the women students
relate to me.”

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b. “I think the fact that I’m a woman makes my Saudi women students feel comfortable.”
c. “The women come to me much more for help and advice. Part of this is because they are slightly better students; the other part is because they feel much more comfortable talking to another woman. They relate to me—plain and simple.”
d. “I think that my gender may cause some uneasiness with Saudi female students in the classroom although I have never sensed this in my own [?] students.”

C. Anthropologist Edward Hall (1976) states that for “high-context” cultures such as Saudi Arabia, everything important happens within the context of relationships with others. To what degree does the quality of your relationships with your Saudi students (i.e., mutual liking and respect or lack thereof) affect their academic performance?
  1. 95% of teacher respondents said “some” to “a lot”
  2. Comments:
     a. “SO TRUE!!!!!!!!
     b. “I think they work for me because they like me. Also, I can get away with correcting them because they know I like them.”
     c. “If the Saudi males do homework, it is to please me, not because they see the value in it. The longer they’re in the USA, however, the more responsible they become.”
     d. “It’s my opinion that Saudi students, male and female, come to class and participate when they believe that the teacher has a personal connection with them and is eager for their success. I try to hang out in the halls and chit-chat.”
     e. “My Saudi males are the ONLY demographic that stays in touch with me after having had a class.”

VIII. Challenge and Satisfaction

A. What is your greatest challenge in teaching Saudi students? Seven themes emerged. In rank order (most to least) they are…

1. Listening/Speaking and Reading/Writing issues (16/68)
   Comments:
   a. “The discrepancy between their verbal and written skills. It’s a pedagogical challenge, esp. in an integrated skills curriculum, as well as a demoralizing factor for the students (being placed in a lower grammar class while in a higher conversation class).”
   b. “I poured my heart, soul, and mind into a writing class and saw so little progress. I despaired!”
2. **Lack of general academic preparation** (14/68) Comments:
   a. “There seems to be a general lack of understanding of the expectations that the US university has of its students—attendance, homework, etc. Study skills are generally not well developed—although there are numerous exceptions, as a whole, they don’t seem to understand the importance of doing assignments, reviewing material, reading directions, etc.”
   b. “Trying to teach them critical thinking skills and academic discipline. I worry constantly about how to teach them these things, and have yet to come up with a solid answer.”
   c. “In a discussion with another colleague, we agreed that they simply don’t know how ‘to learn how to learn.’ They are academically undisciplined—they lack the knowledge of what it takes to succeed.”
   d. “Some Saudi males are just like any other student, very responsible. But others are among the worst students I’ve ever had.”

3. **Motivating them** (11/68) Comments:
   a. “I am a reading/writing teacher. I can’t get them to read or write or believe that they need to learn these skills to go to college.”
   b. “Getting them interested in the topic at hand enough so that they pay careful attention the first time.”

4. **Keeping student performance from affecting personal attitude** (11/68) Comments:
   a. “Trying not to let their lack of motivation, poor class attendance, and attitude bother me.”
   b. “They can be exhausting. They can be loud and challenging and domineering, and they don’t always cooperate with planned activities, nor do they always come prepared to class, so an activity predicated on their having done homework or outside reading won’t work. I have to be much more attune to record keeping, too: absences, tardies, homework preparation, etc.”
   c. “I try to separate the student from the person.”
   d. “I think one of the big things is that it can be very frustrating, but we have to separate our feelings of frustration from the individual. So, being friendly and polite is still very important.”
   e. “We have found that the Saudis have brought the program down and slowed class progress to a degree. As people they can be friendly and fun. We try to separate the student from the person.”

5. **Classroom behavior** (11/68) Comments:
   a. “…managing the classroom climate. The Saudi students are usually much more assertive and can dominate discussions.”
   b. “Behavior issues—sometimes I feel like I am teaching a
group of spoiled 11 year olds.”

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c. “I can’t assume that they will do their homework, come to class on time, speak only English, turn off their cell phones, etc. The chaos level is higher.”
d. “…I have begun to feel more like a high school teacher and less like a university instructor, and have adjusted classroom management accordingly.”

6. Cultural/Religious differences (6/68) Comments:
a. “I’m Jewish, so my challenge has been to overcome my own preconceived notions of Arab and Muslim culture. But I’m doing it—one student at a time—and enjoying the experience. It’s been very positive.”
b. “That I don’t know Arabic and that I know very little about Saudi Arabian culture and I can’t give them examples that they can relate to either in terms of language nor[sic] culture.”

7. Absenteeism/Tardiness (4/68) Comments:
a. “Absences.”
b. “Attendance.”
c. “Getting them to come to class on time.”

8. One (1/68) respondent was most challenged by the Saudi Cultural Mission’s one-year limit on language study

B. What is your greatest source of satisfaction in teaching Saudi students? Three themes emerged. In rank (most to least) order they are…

1. Saudi students’ personalities (35/69) Comments:
a. “They are fun, happy, and engaging students. I have learned so much about their country, culture, religion, and ways of thinking, and I feel so enriched because of my interaction with them. It’s a truly love/hate relationship. They are great individuals, but so difficult to teach in the classroom!”
b. “I enjoy them as persons. The ones I have known are easy going, gregarious, and fun. Class discussions are lively.”
c. “Zest for life.”
d. “Never a dull moment. Easy to catch on to sarcasm and dish out as much as they can take. Once you make a connection with a Saudi student, you find how huge their heart is.”

2. Saudi students’ academic success (26/69) Comments:
a. “Watching their enthusiasm and happiness when they succeed.”
b. “They joy they feel from success and advancement.”
c. “I like them as individuals and when I do manage to discover materials that they can engage with enthusiastically, it is a pleasure to see some genuine excitement.”
d. “Seeing them learn to study and then go on to succeed in their academic programs. In class, they can be a lot of fun for me and
everyone else.”

3. **Two-way cultural interactions with Saudis** (14/69) Comments:
   a. “Watching the Saudis work with diverse cultures for the first time—especially in small groups.”
   b. “In general, being able to use my knowledge of cross-cultural similarities and differences to connect with them and help them meet their goals.”
   c. “When I am able to connect with them despite the cultural differences”
   d. “They’re teaching their classmates to go beyond stereotypes, and they do it much better than all the talking in the world from the teacher…”

IX. Please add any other comments you think might be relevant to this survey.

   **It’s about the individual...**
   A. “Your survey somehow seems to assume that all students from Saudi Arabia are different from students from other countries. I think it is best to focus on each student as an individual.”
   B. “As stated earlier, I think that this survey inherently leads toward negative results. It is assuming that Saudi students are different and makes it much easier to answer as such.”
   C. “As noted above, surveys of this kind tend to obscure tremendous individual variation in students.”

   **It’s about numbers...**
   D. “As long as we can keep the ratio of Saudi students to other nationals lower than 50-60%, they can be an important addition to our programs. On an individual basis, they are interesting, engaging students.”
   E. “The Saudi students add so much to the classes, but along with the energy came numbers that overwhelmed the other students at times. We are now more balanced and in balance the Saudi student[s] enrich the class.”
   F. “I believe the dynamics would be quite different if we had a larger number of Saudi students in our program.”
   G. “…The main difference with the Saudi population is numbers—they have simply overwhelmed many programs which were unprepared for them. Also, it seems that now, a year after the first big influx of Saudis, things have improved—if it’s us or them or both, I’m not sure.”

   **It’s about screening...**
   H. “I don’t know what kind of screen process the Saudi government has established for selecting students, but I think this [Saudi Scholarship] program needs to have some criteria here…”
   I. “If I could ask the Saudi Cultural Mission one thing, it would be how and/or if they’re screening their scholarship applicants...Not all native speakers can apprehend academic English, and not all these young men and women should be expected to either.”

“...45% of recent [American] high school graduates enroll in four-year colleges.”
--Charles Murray (2007)

“... some [Saudi males] were clearly out of their league in an academic setting.”
--Respondent
And finally, it’s about answers...
J. “I am extremely interested in the findings this survey produces. If other ESL teachers out there have had similar experiences and similar concerns for their students, I would like to know. IF ANYONE CAN PROVIDE SOME HELPFUL INSIGHT INTO THIS PHENOMENON I WOULD BE EXTREMELY GRATEFUL!!!”

X. So What?
A. First, we like and enjoy our Saudi student population; we think the women are more serious students than the men; we think the men need to take more responsibility for their own learning and that they overestimate their language ability.

B. Second, in response to the needs of the Saudi Scholarship students, we have changed our classrooms. We are stricter, more clear with our assignments and expectations, use more materials and examples, and are more attentive to monitoring, attendance, punctuality, and on-time assignments: many of us have lowered our expectations. We have learned not to negotiate. We try to be more engaging and active. We are sensitive to the potential shock that Saudi women may feel in co-ed classrooms. Some of our programs are initiating curriculum and policy changes.*

C. Third, we recognize that there is a gap between our Saudi students’ listening/speaking abilities and their reading/writing/critical thinking abilities. We think it comes more from their primary and secondary preparation than from language transfer.

D. Fourth, the vast majority of us believe that relationships are particularly important to our Saudis, and we are reaching out to them. We believe that for students from a largely sex-segregated society, our age and gender affect those relationships.

E. Fifth and last, we find our Saudi students challenging to teach due to a number of learning and behavior issues, but we find them satisfying and rewarding as well.

F. Some points to consider:
1. The Kingdom is aware of the preparation problem
2. They are trying to fix it in several ways
3. Change takes time, especially bureaucratic change
4. Our present Saudi students can’t transfer to their L2 what they don’t have in their L1
5. History may tell us that what we have in our classrooms is a watershed generation. There is every indication that the government of Saudi Arabia hopes it is.

Watershed:
“An event marking a unique or important historical change of course, or one on which important developments depend.”

The program has instituted student contracts which ALL students must sign but they were created due to the Saudis. The contract states that students will attend classes, be on time, hand in timely, completed homework, etc. This can be used to justify dismissal for anyone, but has only resulted in Saudi dismissals.”
--Respondent
XI. **Implications for Further Research**

A. The education of women in Saudi Arabia
   1. How is their education different from their male counterparts? What factors influence the difference in attitude from the Saudi males?
   2. Is the recent American research on segregated classrooms applicable here?

B. Cultural shift inside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
   1. Relatively recent emphasis on education, tracking changes
   2. High-context vs. low-context culture issues: Will SA follow the Japanese model?

C. Literacy and/or Spelling
   1. Reading inventory of current-phase students (in progress) *
   2. Educating the public: Dr. Al-Jarf’s blog “Towards a Literate Nation” (more cultural shift)

D. Teaching Saudis using CALL: A way in?
According SA’s former ambassador to the US, Prince Turki Al-Faisal (2006), internet use has grown more than 1000% in the last five years.

**References:**


Directions for Teaching and Learning, 77, 3-10.