

ARTÍCULO DE REFLEXIÓN  
REFLECTION REPORT

## Adapting cultural materials to meet student needs

*Adaptación de materiales  
culturales para satisfacer las  
necesidades de los estudiantes*

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This reflection article examines the importance of adapting cultural material to meet student needs and program objectives in two different educational contexts: Indonesia and Colombia. A needs analysis was done at both universities, resulting in material adaptation and development. While intercultural understanding and communication was the content of classes taught in both settings, the needs of students varied greatly. Adapting material for critical thinking (Üstünlüoğlu, 2004) and gender roles were the focus in Indonesia; conversely, in Colombia combining TOEFL-prep within a content-based course (Coté, 2013) and incorporating diverse religious perspectives were needed. The necessity of considering specific student populations as well as program goals is discussed for future teaching implications.

**Key words:** critical thinking, material adaptation, intercultural communications, cross cultural understanding, TOEFL-prep, needs analysis

ABSTRACT

RESUMEN

Este artículo de reflexión examina la importancia de la adaptación de materiales culturales para satisfacer las necesidades de los estudiantes y los objetivos de los programas en dos contextos educativos diferentes: Indonesia y Colombia. En las dos Universidades se hizo un análisis de necesidades para realizar la adaptación de los materiales y el desarrollo de estos. Mientras que los contenidos de comprensión intercultural y comunicación se enseñan en ambos países, las necesidades de los estudiantes varían mucho. La adaptación de materiales para el pensamiento crítico (Üstünlüoğlu, 2004) y los roles de género fueron el foco principal en Indonesia; al contrario, en Colombia fue necesario incluir la preparación del TOEFL dentro del curso de contenido (Coté, 2013) e incorporar diversas perspectivas religiosas. Es importante identificar las necesidades que tienen los estudiantes de una población específica así como los objetivos de los diseños de los programas, ya que esto nos permitirá tener herramientas para poder discutir sobre las futuras tendencias en la enseñanza.

**Palabras clave:** pensamiento crítico, adaptación de materiales, comunicación intercultural, comprensión intercultural, preparación de TOEFL, análisis de necesidades

## INTRODUCTION

Often times as educators, we have exciting and interesting class activities. While sometimes they go well, other times they do not. Although there are a myriad of reasons why certain lesson plans work, and others don't, a key component of a successful activity is how well it matches the student population and program objectives you're working with. Clearly, teaching students from different language and cultural backgrounds affects how students will perceive and connect with the material in the classroom. By examining two similar courses focused on intercultural studies, I will showcase the necessity of doing a needs analysis based upon specific student needs and program objectives, by giving examples from my own teaching experiences in Indonesia and Colombia. The benefits of examining two similar courses in two very different contexts will highlight how seemingly similar material must be adapted to fit each specific educational environment, thereby encouraging other educators to thoroughly examine the appropriateness of the materials they use with their student population.

### **Indonesia: teaching cross cultural understanding in a conservative, muslim environment**

At the TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) Conference in March 2013, I presented "Engaging or Offending? Adapting ESL Materials for Muslims Students". My talk focused on my time as an English Language Fellow in Indonesia from 2007-2009. Following the program's Mission Statement, "the English Language (EL) Fellow Program promotes English language learning around the world and fosters mutual understanding between the people of the United States and those of other countries" (2013). The point of this program is twofold: improving English language learning as well as

forging international relationships between the US and other countries.

While in Indonesia, I had the pleasure to teach Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU), which is similar to the Intercultural Communication (IC) course currently offered at Universidad del Norte (UniNorte). Like UniNorte's IC course, CCU is a content-based course designed to introduce students to different ways of thinking, believing, and behaving based upon the specific culture of a country, region, or part of the world. Similar to UniNorte's IC course, CCU is an integrated skills class, meaning that reading, writing, listening, and speaking were all skills taught. Furthermore students in both contexts were required to take English classes in order to graduate from their respective universities. A major difference between these educational contexts is that the TOEFL is used as an exit exam for UniNorte students while the TOEFL was not used as part of students' grades in Indonesia. Because of the importance placed on TOEFL scores at UniNorte, a large part of my needs analysis for UniNorte dealt with how to incorporate standardized test preparation into a content-based course, illustrating how institutional policies greatly affect the outcome of a course.

My first year, I taught at Universitas Negeri Malang (UM), which is a state university with one of the best English departments in the country. While the majority of these Indonesian students are Muslim, almost all of their instructors had earned their Masters in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in an English speaking country like Australia, New Zealand, the US, and Britain. Aside from their tertiary education, these instructors brought their experiences in other countries and cultures to the classroom. Because of this, and the competition to be admitted into a nationally highly ranked English department, the students came from a wide range of ethnic groups, instead

of solely being Javanese, the local dominant ethnic group. As students came from different islands and regions within Indonesia, this resulted in a more ethnically diverse student population. They were eager to learn and open to other cultures, such as learning about American culture.

The second year, I taught at Universitas Islam Negeri Malang (UIN), a private, religious university. A requirement of studying at this university was to be Muslim; a result of this is that all the female students were required to wear a veil on campus. In contrast, at UM, wearing the veil was seen as a personal choice by the female students. The majority of UIN students came from small villages where they had received education at *pesantrons* or *madrassas*, which are Islamic primary boarding schools that do not require students to pay a high fee to attend. These schools combined religious as well as nation-wide educational curriculum. The majority of these students had never left their villages nor visited the capital Jakarta, let alone met a foreigner in person. Furthermore, only a few of the instructors had received their masters in an English-speaking country. In general, students and instructors alike had less experience with people and cultures unlike their own.

Due to the nature of the CCU course I taught at both universities, I asked my students what specific topics they wanted to learn about other countries and cultures. Understandably, students were interested in other Muslims around the world, about their lives, their education, and their faith practices. Because of that, many of my lessons focused on South Asian Muslim countries and experiences of Muslims in the US, UK and Australia.

### Needs Analysis: Critical Thinking and Women's Roles

Aside from focusing on content, I also encouraged students to hone their critical thinking skills.

Language teachers can activate critical thinking in the classroom by highlighting self awareness; that is, they can help the learners have and show understanding of themselves and their surroundings. By means of interactive approaches and materials, teachers can help students be aware of their perceptions, assumptions, prejudices, and values and can help students break old habits to construct a new point of view (Üstünlüoğlu, 2004, p.3).

An intercultural studies class like CCU naturally lends itself to furthering our ability to think critically. As we watch, listen, read, observe, and discuss aspects of other cultures, which may be radically different from our own, we begin to have a heightened awareness of ourselves and our surroundings. The students at UM were more open to these types of activities while the students at UIN were more resistant as they had been taught that to be a good Muslim student, they should be passive and submissive to teachers and their opinions.

For the aforementioned reasons, a few problems occurred, particularly at UIN. As I was a single, American, non-Muslim female teacher, if students felt that the material was somehow threatening their cultural or religious beliefs, some of them became defensive and felt that I was criticizing them. A common, yet unfortunate, human reaction is to want to defend our beliefs, perhaps at the detriment of not listening or learning from others who are different than us. Aside from students' perceptions of my personal identity, the other major problem was the role of women in the material we covered in class. Most

English material is produced in the US, Britain, and Australia, which have Western values of equality between men and women. Because of this, most English material about Muslim women showed them breaking away from these roles and becoming empowered within their families, jobs, religion, and communities. The portrayal of women as weak and submissive is often seen as negative in Western cultures. But, this female empowerment was seen by my more conservative students as “the bad Western influence on Muslims.” They would’ve stayed good Muslims had they remained submissive to their families, husbands, fathers, communities, etc. Clearly, this was a case of very different values imbedded within the material and my students’ reactions within the material.

#### Material adaptation & development

Realizing that in order to foster critical thinking in my students, I needed to first edit material so that students wouldn’t instantly reject it as culturally and religiously inappropriate. While this may seem contradictory, as stated above, people often times become defensive if they feel their basic core values are attacked. Because of this, I edited out a few basic elements, which I knew from previous experiences with my students, would result in them being defensive instead of being able to see another culture objectively. Examples of topics edited out of readings or films were alcohol or drug use, teenage rebellion against parents, and dating before marriage. For instance, the book, which has since been made into a film, *Brick Lane* (Ali, 2003; film by Trijbits, P. Jalfon, Reid, & Gavron, 2007) chronicles the life of Nazneen who grew up in rural Bangladesh. She moved to London at the age of 17 for an arranged marriage to Chanu who is twice her age. Eighteen years later, set in the post-9/11 backlash against Muslims in Western countries,

they have two daughters. During this turbulent time, Nazneen has an affair with Karim, a British born Bengali who’s 10 years younger than her. Clearly, there was negative reaction from conservative British Muslims. They felt that this was an immoral portrayal of a Muslim woman, much the same reaction my Indonesian students would have had, had I not edited sections of the book we read and clips of the movie that we watched. Because I edited out her affair, the students were able to discuss, analyze and learn about the lives of Bengali Muslims in England. Again, while it may seem contradictory to edit material in order to encourage critical thinking, this editing actually enable students to look into and understand cultures which they would not have been able to had they been instantly offended. I felt that students learned much more by studying the editing material than they would have had we not studied the material at all or had studied the unedited material. Avoiding topics which are offensive and immoral to students allowed the class to critically look at the lives of immigrants in another society.

Instead of editing material, which can be quite time-consuming, the better solution is to find material created by Muslims in Islamic countries or conservative Muslims within Western countries which focus on the role of Islam in their life. Again, this allowed students to look into cultures objectively and learn from the material instead of automatically being offended. In particular, *Laskar Pelangi*, or *The Rainbow Troops* in English, was written by an Indonesian Muslim, Andrea Hirata (2008, filmed by Lismana, & Riza, 2008), and therefore has no taboo topics which need to be censored for conservative Muslims. The book and film is set in Belitong, a small island off of Sumatra, and is the true story of a poor Islamic school with dedicated teachers and charismatic students. Because this text did not contain any

immoral or offensive material for my students we were able to analyze the role of classism and poverty in the text. Another example of uncensored material is *The Translator* by Leila Aboulela (1999), which centers on Sammar, a Sudanese Muslim woman living in Scotland. The book is a genuine portrayal of Sammar's faith during her daily life, it shows Africa through the loving eyes of an African, instead of through the critical eyes of a Westerner, and quietly refutes negative ideas of Western countries as hedonistic and without morals. As stated above, many works in English about Muslim women are written from the perspective of a Western audience and therefore critical of conservative Muslim values. By reading a book from the perspective of a Sudanese woman, students were able to see a point of view which is often missing from English materials produced in Western countries. Students were able to discuss the role of loss, family, and grief within a specific cultural context.

#### **Colombia: combining content-based instruction with standardized testing**

Keeping my teaching experiences from Indonesia in mind, I considered the student population here at Universidad del Norte (UniNorte) in Barranquilla, Colombia. At UniNorte, the majority of students in my Intercultural Communications (IC) course are Catholic and a number of them have been outside of Colombia, either to the US, Panama or other Latin American countries. Students' access to knowledge and general awareness about the rest of the world is much higher than my Indonesian students. Part of this is geography; part is similarity in culture and religion to Western countries like European countries, the US, and Canada. Although my current UniNorte students would be surprised at this opinion, to me, American and Colombian cultures are much more similar to each other than American and Asian

or American and Muslim countries. It wasn't until teaching in an Asian Muslim country that I realized the great impact religion has on regulating the morals and norms of a culture. Because so much of what is morally wrong and right is determined by a country's dominate religion, I don't feel the need to edit materials for Colombian students the way I needed to for my Indonesian students.

#### **Needs Analysis: Incorporating Diverse Religious Perspectives & TOEFL-prep**

What is needed here at UniNorte, then? To start with, in my first semester teaching IC, I realized that a number of changes needed to be made to the content of the course. While students do have a greater knowledge of the US, Europe, and Latin America, their understanding of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia could be deepened, particularly because Barranquilla has a more diverse ethnic and religious population than other cities in Colombia. Due to its history as a port city, there are a number of immigrant populations, such as Italian, Chinese, and Lebanese, as is easily seen in the restaurant options throughout the city. Because of this, I was surprised by students' opinions and perceptions of Muslims; as there are Muslims in Barranquilla, I had assumed that students would have more knowledge about this religion. This is not to say that students made Islamophobic or discriminatory statements about Muslims; their lack of knowledge was apparent in what *little they did know*, not in what negative stereotypes they might have expressed in class. Not only was there a limited knowledge about Islam but many students also knew very little about Buddhism and how this religion influences the culture of many Asian countries.

Additionally, as UniNorte students will take the TOEFL in their next English level, it is imperative to begin their preparation for this high-stakes

test. How to combine TOEFL-prep with a content-based course was the second aspect that needed considering in terms of material adaptation. Often times the changes we need to make to course material come from institutional policies, like the high importance given to the TOEFL at UniNorte. As mentioned previously, this was not a priority in Indonesia which is why I did not focus on the TOEFL when adapting course materials for that specific educational context.

### Material Adaptation & Development

The IC course is divided into three modules: culture, which is the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular group of people, subculture, which is a smaller, distinct group within a larger culture, and nonverbal communication. As there was a lack of material about world religions and their subsequent effects on specific cultures, I decided to include religion as subculture and reincarnation as a concept of chronemics, or the concept of time, as an aspect of nonverbal communication. For the subculture module, students read an excerpt from *Oil & Water: Two Faiths, One God* by Amir Hussain (2006), a Pakistani-Canadian, who lives in California and is a theology professor of world religions at a Catholic university. The book is written for a Western and Christian audience in the attempt to combat common misconceptions about Islam and to encourage mutual learning and respect amongst all religions. Continuing the importance of critical thinking, students discuss the question: "Hussain states in his world religions course that 'normally persons talk about other people's religions as they are, and about their own as it ought to be.' Explain this." In an Intercultural Communications class, the need to recognize our own stereotypes about other religions, to distinguish ideals of religion with reality, and to admit the subjective view of our own religion is paramount. To be clear, I

am not teaching students to not be Catholic, but understanding the values of different religions is key to appreciating the viewpoints of a variety of cultures. As stated above, my Indonesian students came from a much more secluded, conservative environment than my Colombian students. Because of that, UniNorte students were able to be challenged to objectively analyze uncensored material.

Furthering this exploration into religious diversity, students watch a film entitled *My Reincarnation* (Plafsky & Fox, 2010), a documentary about a high Tibetan Buddhist Master Chogyal Namkai Norbu and his son Yeshi, who is considered to be the reincarnation of his uncle, a famous Buddhist Master. Students watch the documentary in order to better understand the concept of reincarnation as many of them expressed confusion about the idea of rebirth. The documentary does more than explain this concept of time as we examine intergenerational relationships between father and son as well as cultural clashes between Yeshi, who grew up in Italy, and his father who fled Tibet as a young religious and political exile. Taken from student feedback at the end of my second semester teaching IC, one student stated "I learned to see different perspectives of religions and cultures. I understand how different cultures think and act. I can say that we didn't come to a normal English class. We came to a place to learn more things than that."

Turning my attention to TOEFL-prep material, I was tasked with the challenge of readying students to take the TOEFL while at the same time keeping within the framework of a culture content course. Taking student papers from my first semester teaching IC at UniNorte as well as looking at TOEFL practice tests, I created three types of activities: structure and grammar, listening, and reading. First, looking at the structure section of a TOEFL

practice test, I would analyze what aspect of grammar the question was focusing on, for example collocations. Second, I would look through a student's paper about a particular culture, like Catalan culture in Spain, and find a sentence which already had this structure. I would then modify the student's sentence into the format of a TOEFL question. For example, see the following question from "Grammar Boosters":

However, Catalonia's demands have been ignored by the national government based with the charge of promoting ideas of regional fragmentation of the country.

A  
B  
C  
D

Students would then need to choose which letter indicated the mistake in the sentence. In this case C is the answer as the correct verb and preposition collocation is 'based on'. This way, students were answering questions formatted like the TOEFL test but with a cultural content.

As well, Timed Reading and Timed Listening activities were sprinkled throughout the course material, again modeled off of TOEFL practice tests but with a cultural focus. An example of a Timed Reading activity was an excerpt about nonverbal communication in Latin America, taken from a dissertation entitled *Intercultural Business Communication: The Case of Brazil, Argentina and Mexico* (Nemec, 2010). Other Timed Reading topics included cultural identities of a Jamaican-British woman and aborigines in Australia. In terms of Timed Listening activities, students listened to varying lengths of interviews or conversations about a cultural topic like Canadian convenience stores as subcultures and English vs. Hindi in the language used in advertisements in India. Akin to the TOEFL, students had multiple choice answers in their textbooks, but

not the questions. The first few Timed Listeners proved quite difficult to students as they had no prior experience with this structure of listening question. As the semester progressed, students became familiar with this style of questioning. Again, taken from student feedback, one student wrote "I think that it prepared me for the TOEFL test." Hopefully this preparation will indeed improve their scores on the TOEFL.

Another presentation at the TESOL Conference in March 2013 highlighted the effectiveness of combining content-based, skill-focused activities with TOEFL-practice. Robert Coté, an instructor at the University of Arizona, compared two TOEFL-prep courses at the Saint Louis University in Madrid, Spain, which is an American school with English as the dominant language of instruction. One only did TOEFL practice activities while the other did Content-based skill-focused activities. While both classes improved their TOEFL scores at the same amount, student response was different. While students from the TOEFL-activity course felt the class prepared them for the TOEFL they also found it boring and wouldn't take it again. Students from the content-based course enjoyed the class more, would take it again, but didn't feel that it prepared them enough for the TOEFL. (Based off their scores, both types of courses prepared them equally.) Their conclusion was to teach a course that was content-based while being TOEFL-prep (2013). This program's findings will hopefully be indicative of UniNorte student results as well.

## CONCLUSION

As we can see from these two very different educational settings, Indonesia and Colombia, adapting materials to meet student needs can be quite different, depending on the student population and program goals. In Indonesia,



materials required editing in order to not offend cultural and religious norms while in Colombia, gaps in course content necessitated the inclusion of additional material about major religions of the world as well as TOEFL-prep activities, modeled off of past student papers about a wide range of cultures. Clearly, there are no easy, one-size-fits-all ways to teach any course. One of the exciting aspects of being an educator is assessing what each particular student group needs and then deciding how best to go about filling that need. Of course, as we all know, the results of activities and lesson plans are never truly known until after the class period is over. As educators, we are constantly learning how to best meet the needs of our students, each semester and class period at a time.

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