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Learning from the Women Behind the Veil: An Autoethnography of a Community English Teacher

Sally Anne Perz[1]
[1]University of Alabama at Birmingham // sally118@uab.edu

ABSTRACT: This is the story of a university English instructor's experience teaching an outreach of a School of Education's Community English program. Initially, a community member requested gender-segregated classes for a small group of Yemeni women. After the community program ended, the instructor continued working with the women as a personal volunteer effort. A few years later, the president of the local Islamic society reached out to ask for the classes to be open to all Muslim women in the metropolitan area. The women form a diverse group coming from different countries in the Middle East and different educational backgrounds. The experience provided the author authentic insights into concepts such as culturally sustaining pedagogy, othering, identity, and equity. This narrative, written in the form of an autoethnography, explores scholarship surrounding Muslim women in education and examines the author's changing perspectives while teaching in a community English volunteer effort.

Keywords: Language, Autoethnography, Immigrants, Muslim Women, Culture

Introduction to the Community

For several years, I have taught English to Muslim women from many different countries in the Middle East. I chose to write this narrative as an auto-ethnographical exploration of my experiences rather than the ethnography that I initially considered writing. My community teaching experience provided authentic insights into concepts prevalent in faculty development at my university: culturally sustaining pedagogy, *othering*, identity, and equity. In a desire to go beyond research or praxis-based articles, I chose to use a narrative style inspired by Keleş's (2022a, 2022b) concept of autoethnography as illuminative and evocative. What follows is the story of what I learned when I sought to teach the women behind the veil.

As an English instructor for a large, diverse research university, I was working toward an Educational Studies (Ed. S.) degree with a focus in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and a graduate certificate in Teaching Multilingual Learners. Initially, I taught a small group of women as part of a university community English outreach program at the request of a man in the community, an ESL teacher who had contacted the program looking for a volunteer to teach gender-segregated classes for women from Yemen. I spent hours researching Yemen—particularly the educational environment for women. Immediately, I got enthused about this fascinating ethnographical opportunity, and it took me less than 24 hours to respond with a "Yes!" What followed was months of studying the topic *Muslim women*.

I initially focused my research on Yemen, a country I knew very little about. I learned that Yemen has been debilitated by ongoing violent conflict described as "the largest humanitarian crisis in the world" (Human

Rights Watch, 2021). Understanding the significant, traumatizing circumstances which have led to many Yemeni citizens fleeing the country offered me a lens through which to understand the difficulties many refugees may have faced. Many Yemeni Americans have immediate and extended family in Yemen and will continue to be, at least indirectly, affected by the conflict situation. During the years I have known my students, many of them have traveled home to Yemen and recounted harrowing stories of their visits. Our constant prayer is for peace in their home country and equity for women.
Higher education for women in Yemen is exceedingly limited, and women face several ongoing barriers (Chenni et al., 2016). After the opening of the Women's Studies Center in Yemen at Sana'a University, the curriculum on gender became a topic of dispute. Ultimately, the educational experiment ended in death threats for the Center's Executive Director, Dr. Raufa Hassan al-Sharki, followed by the closure of the center (Willemsen & Van Lenning, 2002). It came as no surprise that my students have varied levels of education from elementary to college. Educational choices in a new country are not always perceived as favorable. Living in a new culture, while adhering to religious and cultural constraints of a heritage culture, can mean safeguarding of deeply held convictions accompanied by liberation from toxic cultural inequalities that exist apart from spiritual beliefs. The complexity of educational opportunities and balancing cultural and religious beliefs is often understated where American Muslim women are concerned—although each woman is unique, negotiating a new identity is a multifaceted process (Haddad et al., 2006).

Teaching Strategies and Pedagogical Approaches

Before I dove into TESOL and the field of education, I had never heard the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). CSP employs an additive approach enriching the whole student rather than employing a broken vessel approach in which a learner is seen as incomplete until they have acquired proficiency in the target language (Paris & Alim, 2017). I determined that my classes would engage the whole student with a holistic approach to enhance confidence in their own ways of knowing (Desmond & Jowlitt, 2012). Much like an additive approach, rather than focusing on a deficit (such as a lack of formal education), a holistic approach will focus on multiple intelligences and empower students to explore their own ways of knowing (Gardner, 1993).

From the beginning, I knew that learning English need not equate to *Americanization* but understanding how a group embraces acculturation while avoiding assimilation was another concept entirely. For a portion of the close-knit subculture of Muslim women whom I teach, it is preferable to sustain a heritage culture of gender segregation. The students explained this to me as a practice in which they did not interact with men who were not related to them. Many of the activities in which they participate at the local mosque are also segregated by gender. This may limit their opportunities to fully integrate into activities where opportunities to speak English are more prevalent. In many cases, the women speak Arabic almost exclusively to one another and to their families, whereas their husbands and school-age children are bilingual.

Though husbands may take the lead role as interpreter, accompanying their wives to appointments and activities, they are often working. Thus, children often become language brokers—they are compelled to teach and translate for their mothers. Guan et al.'s (2015) term *language brokering* describes the cultural mediation process of translating and interpretating language and culture. Essentially, the children take on the role of linguistic and cultural mediators. Contrary to studies of many other cultures in which language brokering experiences may cause stress on children, the family centeredness and interdependence of certain groups, such as Arab, Asian, and Latin immigrants, has resulted in beneficial circumstances for both the language learner and the language broker (Guan et al., 2015).

Qualitative research found that the role of language broker produces socio-emotional benefits, such as increased empathy and "transcultural perspective-taking" which is described as "the ability to understand different cultural perspectives" (Guan et al., 2014). Additionally, McQuillan and Tse (1996) posit that that language brokers experienced increased confidence, independence, cultural awareness, and a higher-than-average level of proficiency in their second language. For parents participating in language learning with children-brokers "language brokering can be seen as a creative way for the family to communicate and

interact with outside entities, maximizing a valuable asset" (Weisskirch, 2010, p. 80). Additionally, for some parents, acculturation is accelerated when language brokering is a means of acquisition (Weisskirch, 2010). Accelerated acculturation may also build confidence as students have greater opportunity for speaking.

My students were constantly (albeit needlessly) apologetic about what they thought they did not know about English. For the first year, I taught 6-12 women two hours each week. Performing a needs assessment early on demonstrated that their average speaking proficiency was far greater than their comprehension. Still, it was not until I had worked extensively with the students individually that I realized that they understand much less than their speaking proficiency demonstrated. I wanted to meet their most direct needs, so I primarily used Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). I created units on visiting with neighbors, talking to teachers, going to the doctor, eating out at restaurants, community life, and sharing interests.

I have tried to create a classroom that honors spirituality by always considering the role religion plays in their lives and choosing materials and lessons accordingly. This means using images that reflect cultural and religious ideas of modesty and avoiding aspects of Western culture that may be offensive. I have always chosen digital images carefully to respect what I have learned about Muslim culture. Additionally, I have tried to keep their constraints and convictions in mind when I create lessons, find websites, and send home additional handouts.

I have found that learner-centered activities that focused on interaction, collaboration, and communication engage my learners and enhance learning. This CLT approach reflects: "a holistic perspective; authentic learning; curriculum negotiation; inquiry-based lessons; language learning, a develop-mental process; alternative assessment; and community of learners" (Schwarzer, 2009, p. 28). When I asked one of my students why she wanted to learn to speak English, she summed up her desires quite eloquently by saying she wanted to "speak every people at everywhere" and make American friends. This profoundly demonstrates the importance of communication for connection that Freire (2018) observed: "To be human is to engage in relationships with others and with the world" (p. 3). We practice communication in our classes each week with one basic goal in mind: help the women communicate in English so they can engage in relationships in the greater community confidently.

Sometimes I have had help from a bilingual volunteer from the Muslim community to enhance language learning. I learned firsthand that primary language support is one key element in cultivating an additive approach over a subtractive approach (Lavadenz, 2011). Encouraging my students to use their Arabic to help them process their new language has been a substantial component of my teaching approach. I have always designed activities to employ both English and Arabic. Having the Arabic speakers present was an essential part of translanguaging because it allowed the students to engage their entire linguistic repertoire and demonstrated the value of a bilingual identity (Garcia et al., 2017).

I was slightly puzzled when I first met my first bilingual volunteer because I learned that she was also from Yemen, was a member of the same community, and attended the university where I taught. In an effort to learn more about the community as a whole, I asked her why she was comfortable with integrated learning, but the other students were not. She explained that in their community it was usually based on the husband's comfort level with the wife participating in integrated education. When she had to take a maternity leave, I was able to get help from one of the students' daughters. The very next year, my worlds intersected when the daughter enrolled in one of my university English classes. Eventually, she took three of my classes. This connection allowed me an insider perspective into the women of the community that profoundly impacted my understanding of the concept of *Muslim women*.

Growing Cultural Awareness

My initial goal had been to try to learn as much as an outsider could about a group that could be described as subaltern. The Yemeni women were a part of a small subgroup that was not fully integrated with the outside community. Some of the women with children in the local Islamic Academy had very little, if any,

interaction with English speakers or non-Muslims. Many of the women with children in public school could only communicate effectively through their husbands. Only a few of the women could drive. Additionally, their lived experiences often differed from the larger Muslim community. In the early months, some of the women wore both the hijab and niqab during class which made it difficult for me to get to know them by appearance. The hijab, which veils the head and shoulders, is familiar to many non-Muslims. However, I had never spoken with women wearing the niqab, which covers the face almost entirely with only the eyes visible. This often exacerbated my struggle to remember unfamiliar names and faces. Still, soft kind voices greeted me each week, and I felt welcomed. I began to wonder if the mainstream characterization of the hijab as a symbol of oppression played a part in denying the agency of Muslim women and reducing them to a stereotype.

As I got to know the women more, I learned from their stories that they were often victims of "othering," seen as outsiders by neighbors and struggling to fit in (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011). They recounted often feeling rushed to speak and frustrated that they did not fully understand English speakers. I was learning how essential it would be to combat language anxiety and to encourage students to look at their individual experiences beyond academia as valuable ways of learning. I also began to realize that the women were facing cultural misunderstandings and assumptions on a regular basis. One woman from the Muslim community came to see what the classes were all about though she spoke proficient English. She asked why I was interested in teaching the Muslim women and then inquired, "Weren't you afraid when they asked you to teach?" I was puzzled by her question until I sought clarification. Then the puzzle pieces fit as she expressed that she had often seen Muslim families stereotyped as extremists, or even worse, as terrorists. She explained that some of the women felt like outsiders and did not integrate into the community which, in her opinion, further perpetuated barriers. Sometimes, it was not extreme views that *othered* them but the simple fact that they were *different and apart* from the others.

When I first began to teach the women, I realized that the phenomenon of gender-segregated learning was foreign to many outsiders. I began to see how often Western ideologies equate religious fundamentalism with oppression and dismiss the ideologies that inform Muslim life. I have learned that an approach to gender segregated education should include both a culturally responsive pedagogy and an understanding of the whole student. Respecting religious convictions requires that I remain considerate and sensitive to these segregated spaces, rather than presuming oppression. Acknowledging the religious and cultural significance of segregated spaces is essential to inviting the complete Muslim woman into the classroom.

Knowing that Middle Eastern societies are strongly patriarchal, I began to explore what might inform these differences in my students and in their families. As I sought to fully grasp what it might look like to balance the role of a Muslim women in education, I studied critical perspectives in Freire's (2018) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (originally published in 1968). I wondered how factors such as family dynamics, adherence to segregated spaces, and feminist thinking might influence learning experiences. The more I researched *Muslim women*, the more I realized what may seem obvious to many readers: researching *Muslim women* is just as elusive as researching *Christian women, white women, women of color,* or simply *women.*

In each of my teaching contexts, I was constantly reminded of Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie's (2009) TedTalk, "The Danger of a Single Story." As a culture, we often tell a single story of *Muslim women* as oppressed as if there is not a limitless mind behind the veil. At one point in our studies, I began to see learning stall despite weekly lessons, so I decided to let go of some of our scripted dialogues and lessons. I began using very simple journal writing exercises and oral reading. I followed this with informal storytelling exercises, and our classes were completely transformed. I learned that my students were storytellers and would excel abundantly when given the chance to tell their stories. Why do we fail to look beyond the hijab to see the free spirits within? Listening to their stories gave me an insight into their religion, their culture, and their identities. They have so many stories. *Stories of traveling to the US. Stories of Muslim weddings. Stories of late-night visits to the emergency room. Stories of family back home. Stories of oppression. Stories of traveling to family. Stories of getting a driver's license. Stories of citizenship tests. Stories of arranged marriages. Stories of friendship. Stories that make us weep. Stories that make us laugh. Stories of love. Stories of loss. Stories of hope. Stories of freedom.*

Wearing the hijab and niqab is often viewed as a symbol of oppression (Sulaiman & Raifu, 2020). For many, the idea that a woman could be a Muslim and a feminist may seem oxymoronic. Scholars, such as Bahar

(2021), reveal a potential conflict between religion and culture when they question whether the patriarchal elements of Islamic society are a result of a male agenda rather than a religiously mandated message from Islamic texts. Still, a culturally responsive atmosphere should maintain respect for religious convictions even as it may inspire deeper readings of religious texts. Djelloul (2018) explores how Islamic feminists (not an oxymoron) are deconstructing the patriarchy as they search the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* for evidence to support the feminist perspective. These Islamic feminists, echoing Freirean ideals, reject the idea of saving the *Muslim woman*—a trope they see as a relic from colonialism (Djelloul, 2018). Over two decades ago, Phuntsog (1999) asserted that the "foremost challenge in education is to create learning environments that maintain the cultural integrity of every child while enhancing their educational success" (p. 99). This challenge is just as evident for contemporary educators.

Creating a holistic, pluralistic framework will only happen when educators begin to look at themselves rather than simply looking at how to address the "other." As an outsider working in a community heretofore unknown to me, I understood that it was essential to promote an inclusive viewpoint on culture and religion, respecting the various perspectives of my students. Djelloul's (2018) assertion that Muslim women can embrace both Islam and feminism simultaneously helped facilitate an understanding of the diversity of the women I teach and the relationship between their religious constraints and religious convictions. This perspective informs the prescriptive assumption of oppression as a reality in the lives of Muslim women. Badran (2011) explored the development of feminism from secular feminism to Islamic feminism to Muslim holistic feminism, asserting that Islamists' endorsement of *secular* as "alien, foreign, non-native and hence inauthentic" and *religious* as" indigenous, native and authentic" polarizes the discussion and ultimately endangers the fight for equal rights (p. 80). Additionally, Zubair and Zubair (2017), themselves Muslim women, posit that empowering women from within Islam is a way to both negotiate secular notions of feminism and challenge patriarchal elements of Islam.

Understanding the complexity of a woman's role in Islam, I began to realize that respect for the individual convictions of my students should inform my instruction. Just like any woman, the learning experiences of Muslim women are deeply intertwined with political circumstances, individual cultural experiences, and religious identity. As I built relationships in the community, I began to see the different intersections of religion, identity, and culture and how these dynamics influenced learning. In the context of my community students, cultural and religious factors are interpreted in such a way to enforce gender segregation—dictating that females may not inhabit the same learning spaces as males. Yadav's (2010) perspective offered me a lens to understand the self-imposed gendered spaces as she explores the woman's role in Islamic activism by going beyond the public/private sphere to what she calls "segmented spaces" (p. 5). These spaces refer to a place where women's work is "spatially private but politically public"—thus the work is done in the private realm but influences the public realm (Yadav, 2010, p. 2). Yadav's discussion surrounds women who willingly follow religious constraints out of piety. For these women, Western feminist ideals are not desirable. Yadav's findings suggest a narrative in which self-segregated education can be empowering.

The Women

In the midst of my research about *Muslim women*, I began to learn something I should have known all along: Muslim women are diverse individuals just like any other group often stereotyped, amalgamated, and categorized. My Muslim student, the daughter of my student from the community outreach program demonstrated the differences. Knowing she had enrolled in my class, I carefully examined my syllabus to see what might make her uncomfortable, even adding a few titles as alternative choices. Ironically, she never chose an alternative reading or viewing. Zubair and Zubair (2017) posit that Muslim women situate their own identity and understanding of feminism as separate elements of their identity—a individualistic concept which is often perceived as primarily Western (Zubair & Zubair, 2017). I was fascinated to watch this student navigate the college environment up close for three semesters. She created a beautiful presentation on the hijab explaining the difference between religious and cultural expectations. I watched her make friends and participate fully. A few years later, my daughters and I were invited to her bridal shower. Everything I thought I knew about *Muslim women* was turned upside down. There was a sense of unbridled joy, and what might

even be called wild abandon, as the women (and young children) celebrated together. I felt honored to be a part of such a celebration of love.

Knowing how I had been welcomed into the Muslim community, I began to fear that my efforts at ethnography and earlier thoughts about dissertation research could be perceived as a betrayal. The more comfortable I felt with the women in the community, the less comfortable I felt publishing descriptive details of my research. Amidst my teaching and my growing relationships with the students, I found myself constantly questioning my ethical dilemma.

I was in the first semester of my doctoral program, when I read Lareau's (2011) *Unequal Childhoods*. The focus of the class was educational foundations, and the book was the culmination of Lareau's research on 88 families, with an in-depth look at 12 of them. This experience profoundly changed the course of my research. Lareau took a deep dive into the lives of these families demonstrating both benefits and drawbacks to two types of parenting styles: *concerted cultivation* and *the accomplishment of natural growth* used by families of varying socioeconomic levels. I found myself fascinated by Lareau's research from several perspectives. As a blooming researcher, I truly felt that Lareau had demonstrated that each family had their children's best interest at heart even when they differed in approach. I was completely dismayed to reach the end of the book and find that a few of the families did not appreciate their portrayal and completely cut off contact with Lareau. I knew that I would learn from Lareau's experiences.

When the outreach classes I had been teaching for the university ended, I continued to work with the community. A few years later, I expanded my efforts beyond the women from Yemen, at the request of the president of the local Islamic society, moving our classes to the mosque and welcoming any Muslim women who were second language learners. Some of the students cannot drive, do not have access to childcare, and do not integrate into the community. Others drive frequently, use daycare, and attend college or work outside the home. The women are strongly committed to their faith, dedicated to modest attire, and identify strongly as predominantly wives and homemakers. One of my favorite moments of all was when the women were delighted to learn that I had spent over two decades teaching my six children at home before returning to academia. I will never forget how one of them laughed and said, "You are a Muslim woman, too." She was lightheartedly teasing me about having six children, which seemed unusual to them for an American. More than anything she was saying, *you are one of us and we welcome you.*
Weekly, I am greeted by the soft sounds of Arabic which turn into English greetings as I enter the classroom. I am greeted with traditional kisses on both cheeks, warm cups of Arabic tea or coffee, and homemade treats. I was given a party on my birthday and gifts when students traveled abroad. There are too many kindnesses to name. Despite my efforts to be called by my name, they call me *teacher*.

One of our earliest classes focused on an activity called "All Our Names." I started by writing my names, nicknames, titles, and terms of endearment on the board. Next, each woman did the same. *Honey. Sweetheart. Mama. Love. Dear.* We discussed the cultural use of terms of endearment, specifically what we call our spouses and children and what they and others call us. In hindsight, I believe this is when I began to realize that we were more alike in many ways than we were unalike. *Teachers. Students. Women. Wives. Mothers.* Their veils do not separate us. We can all take a seat at the table. ***Together***.

The Author

Sally Anne Perz is an English instructor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). She has a Master of Arts in English with a concentration in rhetoric and composition, an Education Specialist degree in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages), and a graduate certificate in Teaching Multilingual Learners. Sally Anne is pursuing a doctorate in Educational Studies in Diverse Populations with a concentration in Pedagogical Studies. She volunteers in a community outreach where she teaches English to Muslim women who are primarily immigrants and refugees.

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