

Who am I as an Arab in English?

*Female Arab Writing Tutors on
Language and Identity*

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Short Paper: Who am I as a Writer in English?

This assignment asks you to respond to the question “Who am I as a writer in English?” Prior to this assignment, you will have read works by multilingual or multidialectal authors who have treated different aspects of writing or communicating in English. Ponder these readings and our related class discussions as you begin to answer this question for yourself. I do not want to place many parameters around this assignment. You may respond in any form you feel conveys your answer: essay, short story, poetry, narrative. As such, it is hard for me to place a page or word minimum on the assignment. While it is a short assignment (i.e., significantly shorter than your research paper), you need to respond to all parts of the question: Who am I / as a writer / in English?

Associated Readings

- Hughes, Langston. "Theme for English B." *Poetry Foundation*. 2009. Web. 14 April 2009.
- Kaplan, Robert. "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education." *Readings in English as a Second Language*. Ed. Kenneth Croft. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop Publishers, 1980. 399-417.
- Mellix, Barbara. "From Outside, In." *Georgia Review* 41 (1987): 258-267.
- Mori, Kyoko. *Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Two Cultures*. United States: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997.

Theoretical bases: Macro-social

- Phillipson (1992) Pennycook (1994)

English as a hegemonistic force in post-colonial countries

- Devalues local languages and culture in the interest of promoting English as a global language
- Results in educational endeavors and language policies that do not benefit post-colonial communities

Theoretical bases: Micro-social

- Canagarajah: English and the post-colonial
 - Identity
 - Agency
 - Context
 - Resistance
- Norton: SLA
 - Identity
 - Investment
 - Imagined communities

From assignment to research:

“Who am I as a writer in English?”



How do Arab peer writing tutors interpret their English ability in terms of their identities as bilingual Arabs?

The Informants

- 10 Arab female writing tutors, age 19-21, from the UAE, Bahrain, Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Egypt
- 4 GCC citizens who had grown up in their own countries
- 6 global nomads
 - 3 raised in Arab countries not their own
 - 3 raised primarily in North America, then UAE as teenagers

Notable Themes

1. **Connecting with family, friends, and other Arabs via spoken Arabic is very important to them.**
2. They enjoy defying stereotypes with their English.
3. They sometimes have to downplay their English proficiency (it's not always appreciated!)
4. Their bilingual abilities expand their world and make them more creative and critical thinkers (and better tutors).

Speaking in Arabic

Well, English is such a broad language and it breaks through different cultures but, I think for me, to be able to speak Arabic narrows it down, gives me some sort of identity. It's the connection for me with my ancestors, the land, history—which is really, really important for me. Like, if I didn't know Arabic and great-grandfather came back to life, he'd probably have a heart attack and I'd probably lapse into one as well. I've always tried to make the family proud and I felt that that was one of the ways that I'd be able to achieve it.

Speaking in Arabic

Talking in Arabic you tend to draw on all these different references that are so exclusive to the culture and they're so funny and they're entertaining and they're smart and it's such a pleasure being able to talk like that to someone who shares that with you.

English has a different kind of humor, but in Arabic I get to tap into something that is part of a cultural identity that really connects everything in the family and everything in my country.

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Defying Stereotypes

There were people from all around the world and they were just completely shocked that I was **a Muslim Arab woman who had a voice, who could talk, who had a personality.**

And the moment they saw my openness to discuss and explain issues, they were coming at me with questions about Islam, about Arabs, about the Middle East, and I loved it. Because I felt like I was doing what my duty is.

Defying Stereotypes

Well for one thing, my family, in general—there's a stereotype that they try to be very Arab, Arab, Arab. So when [professors and other Arabs] see my last name, they [make assumptions about me]. When they hear how well I speak English, that's very shocking for them! Also, my writing catches them off-guard and so that means a lot for me because it's not my language.

Defying Stereotypes

I'm trying to write some fiction dealing with Arab Americans, or with Arabs, or with Americans viewing with the Arab world—something along those lines. They are stories in English, and I find it so interesting to try and incorporate Arabic into these stories and dialogue. I like showing these two cultures in a way that is non-confrontational or in a way that might be challenging, but [which demonstrates that] those challenges can be overcome.

Defying Stereotypes as Tutors

Sometimes we judge a person's eloquence in English just by how they look. If they look Western, then they must be able to speak English well. If they are wearing an abaya, then they must not know English very well. Here at AUS, the wide-spread belief is that Pakistani or Indian students are the best at English, since they were most likely schooled in the language, and Arab and Iranian students are not as proficient.

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English Not Appreciated!

If you don't speak English, then that's not good for you because that means you haven't been properly educated and you're not going to get a good job. **But then, if you speak good English and it comes at the expense of your Arabic, you're never going to get married. . . .** Like, if we're going to visit my mother's relatives, [my mom] says this thing--the literal translation is **"Don't twist your tongue."** And what she means is, **"Don't talk in English."**

English Not Appreciated!

- Because I was good in English, in school they used to call me, in Arabic: “*bint Mary*.” Mary suggests a British girl, and *bint Mary* suggests you were born from a British mother. So whenever I would **speak in English without a strong Arabic accent**, I was told “Shut up. Shut up, *bint Mary*!”
- “You won’t wash the dishes? Why? You’re *bint Mary*?”

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Bilingualism / Complexity

If I'm introduced to a person in Arabic, I have to be a lot more formal, depending on the status, or rank, or age—or whatever. Whereas when I'm speaking English, there are no formalities as such. You just need to be polite. But in Arabic there are certain phrases or words I have to make sure that I use. As Muslims, we have to say *du'a'*—prayers—but there are certain prayers for each person [depending on] rank, age group, and stuff. So there's a lot of thinking involved. (She chuckles) You probably kill a million brain cells doing it.

Bilingualism / Complexity

- When someone talks about a certain thing or argues a certain thing, I can see it from many different perspectives as opposed to just one. For example, [it's clear that Arabs and Westerners] don't really see eye-to-eye. The Western people will say, "How can these people have their daughters living with them until they're married? That's why their women are so dependent," and all of that. And the Arabs will say, "How can they let their daughters go out on the streets dressed like that?"
- But I can see both points of view and I understand both. I really feel like it's a very positive thing in regards to journalism because Arab journalists and Arab media always want the Western point of view so I have that. But at the same time, I can write English and offer the Arab point of view as well so it's very good to have both.

Bilinguals as Tutors

Maryam's research paper conclusion:

In peer tutoring, tutors are often faced with situations wherein they need to relate the rhetorical conventions of English to the tutee. Being bilingual, the tutor has greater metalinguistic awareness and a better understanding of language operations which in turn allow him/her to communicate the rhetorical demands of the English language.

Bilinguals as Tutors

I know tutoring sessions should be in English to get them students used to the language and writing in the language , but I found that sometimes having a discussion about the research question in Arabic was a lot more helpful to the Arabic-speaking tutees .

That's because they seemed more relaxed and so **much more capable of expressing themselves and what was on their mind in Arabic than in English**. They could get their ideas across with more ease and they could tell me about what they wanted to write while in English, they seemed to pause and sort of struggle in articulating exactly what was on their minds.
But at this phase where they are just thinking and trying to put it into words, it was so much easier for them to do some of that thinking in Arabic.

Tutor as Cultural Hybrid

“The political figures between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages” (Edward Said, 1993, p. 332).

Canagarajah (1999), suggests such individuals “have the potential to resist the forces of uniformity and hegemony. . . . Shifting their position from objects of this discourse to become agents, they use discourse critically and creatively” (p. 183).

Re-thinking our Bilingual Tutors

- **As theorizers of a multilingual / multicultural approach to learning writing.**
- **As individuals who choose to use their local language and English in ways that empower them.**