

**Action Research Study
Submitted to the Education Institute's
Action Research Database**

Author

Mohammed A A Manasreh

Title of the Study:

*“English in an Islamic Cultural Context: Qatari Students’ Attitudes to English
and advised Practices”*

Location or Institution

Omar Bin AlKhattab Educational Complex for Boys

Abstract (maximum of 150 words)

This paper sheds light on teaching English in the Qatari context. I have explored my students' attitude towards English through a survey which shows generally positive attitudes towards English among my students. My paper draws conclusions about the powerful impact of the socio-cultural setting of the language classroom on the most appropriate methodology to be used and on students' attitudes towards learning the language and consequently the outcomes.

Grade Level: preparatory

Data Collection Methods: questionnaires

Subject/Topic: English

Omar Bin Alkhattab Educational Complex for Boys
The Academic Unit

“English in an Islamic Cultural Context: Qatari Students’ Attitudes to English and advised Practices”



Submitted by:
Mohammad Manasreh
English Language Academic Supervisor
Omar Bin Alkhattab Educational Complex for Boys

First Annual Conference on Action Research
Saturday, June 21, 2008
Doha, Qatar

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

.....
3

MY EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

.....
4

LITERATURE REVIEW

.....
5

MY SCHOOL SURVEY

.....
6

THE CULTURAL CASE

.....
8

BEST PRACTICES IN MY CONTEXT

.....
9

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

.....
11

CONCLUSION

.....
12

BIBLIOGRAPHY

.....
14

APPENDICES

.....
16

“Nobody in the West has really spent enough time thinking about what differentiates in the Muslim mind. We assume that if it works in New York, it will work in Baghdad, but there are significant differences. There has to be more sensitivity to this issue.”

Sir Martin Sorrell, CEO, WPP

Group

Wall Street Journal, October 1,

2003

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of pedagogy, or the art of being a teacher, since the Socratic Method to the post method era has witnessed many approaches to language teaching. Many of them did not survive the test of time, others gave birth to new approaches.

With globalization and wide spread of English language learning, the creation of culturally sensitive teaching method and learning environment becomes an issue of an increasing importance.

Since I teach English to 12-year-old students in an Arabic culture, I have chosen to address this issue in my paper and see what it means to me as a language teacher. This topic plays a pivotal role in shaping my students' attitude towards learning the English language. The importance of this role increases dramatically due to its political connotations which I will explain below.

In my paper, I will try to identify the socio-cultural state of the students at my school that paints the language classroom and contributes to the choice of proper teaching methods. I will also explore the socio-political factors that shape students' attitude towards English. I have divided my paper into three parts. The first part throws light on the school environment in which I teach and examines some of the literature that deals with teaching English in an Arabic and Islamic context. The second part presents a survey of my students' attitudes and explores how my socio-cultural context

impacts on my teaching methods. The last part addresses teaching English at my school by discussing some teaching methods and practices that best suit my classroom context.

2. MY EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT: ENGLISH IN QATAR

Lamontagne (2005:11) describes the Arabian Peninsula prior to the discovery of oil in the 1950's as a harsh environment governed by the traditions and cultural heritage of the desert Arabs. "Islam was practiced in its purest sense, and was paramount; unquestioned." There was very little development and no formal educational system and most education was religious. The discovery of oil provided the necessary finances to improve the education system.

Qatar is a peninsula in the Arabian Gulf. It is a multicultural country with 20% of the total population being natives. Many languages are spoken in the street, Arabic and English are the main two languages. The Qatari context is shaped by rapid change in all aspects of life including education.

Education is undergoing a reform movement labeled "education for a new era". The national curriculum standards, which have been prepared by the Center for British Teachers (CfBT), are part of this reform. Schools have to meet those standards in whatever methodology, approach and materials they find suitable. (For further information see www.sec.gov.qa)

The freedom to select the suitable method has lead to a large variety of teaching methods being adopted by schools, most of the times not monitored or supported properly. Syed (2003:238) notes that rapid change in education results in little time for reflection, consolidation or recalibration.

Schools are either centrally controlled by the Ministry of Education or independent under the supervision of the Supreme Education Council (SEC). Independent schools are autonomous institutions financed by the government. Currently there are 72 independent schools out of 150 public schools in the country. My school is one of them.

Policy makers at SEC linked Educational development with English. At Omar Bin Alkhattab School, English is one of four core subjects along with science, maths and Arabic. It is also the medium of instruction for maths and science. One of the striking features of ELT in Qatar is the rarity of Qatari ESL teachers in the field where most of the teachers are expatriates. Syed (2003: 238-239) remarks that although such a state brings diversity, it also leads to socio-cultural distance between learners and teachers.

Teachers in Qatar, like myself and many teachers in the Gulf, face many challenges in teaching English such as low student motivation, underachievement, reliance on rote learning and memorization, dependence on high-stakes testing and outdated methodologies in particular the grammar-translation method. Students also lack communicative chances beyond the classroom.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching English in an Arabic cultural setting has been highlighted by various writers over the past few decades (Syed, 2003; Karmani, 2005; Asraf, 2005 and Rehman, 2005)

Malallah (2000:19-43) conducted a research with Kuwait University undergraduates which examined students' attitudes and motivations to learning English as a foreign language in a predominantly Arab and Moslem environment. This research showed that Kuwait University undergraduates, in general, have positive attitudes towards learning English, towards the English language and towards native speakers of English. This research also showed that students have reasons to study English and the Kuwaiti society values and regards the English language highly. (For some samples of Malallah's study see appendix 1).

However, Al-Mutawa, (1986, 1994) as cited by Malallah (2000:21) conducted a research project with Kuwaiti students which shows that Kuwaitis are not in favour of the English language and its learning. Most students did not regard English as beneficial for a better job and future business.

Cleary, (1996) conducted a research with university students in Malaysia. The results showed that 100% of the students believed that English is “conduit for western culture and Arabic should be raised to equal status with English or should completely take the role of English in Malaysia.”

Kassim Shaaban and Ghazi Ghaith (2003) conducted a study that investigates the linguistic attitudes of college students in Lebanon towards Arabic, French, and English. The results of the study show that students perceived the foreign languages, French and English, as more useful than the native language, Arabic, in the domains of science, technology, and business. The study has also shown how English is considered the language of the future by most Lebanese, a language whose mastery would open wide the gates of education and global trade and communication. (For some samples from this study, see appendix 2)

4. MY SCHOOL SURVEY

I tried to explore my 12-year-old students' attitudes towards English language through a short survey that consists of eight short questions. The survey questions aim at identifying students' attitudes towards the English language, Learning English and English speakers. They also attempt to find out my students' motivation behind learning English and how much importance students give to grammar in English

language learning. 300 students took part in the survey. The total number of students in my school is 600. My main findings are the following:

- Students tend to have positive attitudes toward the English language and its learning. 89% of students said they like English Language.
- Most students have confidence when speaking English. 72% of students said they do not feel shy when speaking English.
- Students have an instrumental motivation for language learning. 95% of students consider it as a means for a better job.
- Most students (73%) think that English Language is easy. This result surprised me because my students usually complain that English is very difficult. Their answer to question 8 explains this. They view grammar as the language itself.
- 32% of students said they like English more than Arabic. This is another surprise to me. I tried to investigate reasons behind this and discovered that some students thought the question asks about English as a school subject rather than a language.
- There seems to be a paradox in some students' attitudes towards English. The results show a strong drive among students to learn English language. But yet some students (29%) do not like English speakers. This could stem from non-educational factors. Most of students (71%) do like English speakers though.
- Most students (83%) consider learning grammar an essential part in learning English. This is a result of the grammar-translation method. This also explains why Arab students suffer with their English when it comes to communication.

The harmful unwanted consequence of this situation is clear when seeing writers such as Tudor (2001:50) who discusses the importance of communicative skills and views language as “a tool for achieving communicative goals.”

Allwright also (1995:6) describes the language classroom as a social setting "a setting where people have to take account, in some way or another, and for good or ill, of the fact that they are not entirely alone there." Language classrooms are embedded in their wider social settings.

Since students' culture is the primary factor behind their attitudes towards language, I will try to discuss my students' cultural setting.

5. THE CULTURAL CASE

"English is not just a language, any more than Islam is just a religion. The names English and Islam, whatever else they may be, are names of two very big battalions when it comes to the current international power struggle for control of the Middle East"

*Harris (1991) as cited by Karmani
(2005)*

To many the cultural relation between the west and the Islamic world is a demonstration of Rudyard Kipling's poetic line "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, Some surveys' results published by the Pew Center in Washington DC can give us a better understanding of the situation: (See appendix 4)

- 7 of 8 Muslim countries see U.S. as a military threat to their country
- 20 of 21 countries (even Israel) believes the U.S. favors Israel too much over Palestinians

- Both sides associate many negative characteristics with each other such as being arrogant, violent, fanatical and selfish.

The Question is Can we separate English from “its” culture? This issue is a controversy among educators. Brown (1987: 123) as cited by Malallah (2000) points out that “a language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven”. In my opinion, language is a carrier of culture, but it is not always a negative culture. Tollefson (1991) as cited by Congreve (2006) stated said: “English can be a tool; it can foster modernization and westernization; it can empower and it can alienate”. I believe that teachers should use English as an international language of understanding and sharing human principles.

6. BEST PRACTICES IN MY CONTEXT (Based on my experience)

Rule Number One "Get rid of the grammar-translation method!"

Although many English Language teachers in Qatar claim to have got rid of the grammar-translation method decades ago, some of its characteristics are still present in classrooms. Al Mutawa and Kailani (1989:14) note that the situation is not different in many Arab countries. At my school much emphasis is given to the teaching of grammar rules. Writing is part and parcel of every exam. All units have vocabulary lists and students are asked to memorize as much separate vocabulary as possible. Translation is used by many teachers when it comes to difficult words and in many cases vocabulary items are given in both Arabic and English. Teachers believe this method is the best way to teach a language that is not used for everyday communication. I think this should not be the case.

My survey's results show that most students think learning grammar is essential to learn English. This shows how the Grammar translation method is wide spread in my context. This makes students worry about their mistakes and maybe shy when speaking English. I remember my school's principal talking about a language course he took at ELS center, he learned nothing but confidence and ignoring his grammar mistakes, which was enough to improve his English later on.

Krashen as cited by Glisan and Drescher (1993:23-24) asserts that conscious learning cannot lead to acquisition. The grammar-translation method does not give students an opportunity to acquire language in an unconscious, natural way and in an appropriate social context as it is the case with CLT. Lock (1996:256) notes that CLT discredits the structural approach to second language teaching because it did not enable learners to use the language to communicate appropriately in real contexts. My advice is to

focus on communicative and interactive exercises and provide students with a real-life collaborative learning environment.

Many of my colleagues may ask: So, how should Grammar be taught?

I think that Grammar should be taught in a functional approach and in an authentic context. Grammatical notions are to be presented implicitly and the focus should be on the function rather than the form. Glisan and Drescher (1993:24) argue that grammar becomes meaningful only if it is placed in real contexts and natural discourse and grammar instruction is beneficial to learners if it is taught as a vehicle for real communication and interaction in the target language

How should vocabulary be taught in my context?

One of the best ways of teaching vocabulary that I have practised successfully is Jokes. Jokes are a good way for students of all ages to practise reading, critical thinking and predicting outcomes. Pemberton (2007:286) suggests a good technique for jokes called "Joke of the week." He explains that "Put a joke up in a prominent spot then make a flap to cover the punch line so that students can have a guess. Start with a short joke and later progress to longer jokes and brain teasers. ... Also, encourage students to contribute their own jokes".

Rule Number Two "Be culturally sensitive !"

As an EFL teacher in an Arab context, cultural sensitivity is a pivotal factor when teaching English language. I find adaptation of methods and materials sometimes a necessity on cultural grounds. This is clear in TESOLA (adults) coursebooks where many cultural references do not fit in the context of my students. As part of an Arab Islamic culture, there are many values which differ from those that characterize the

western culture. In order to make my teaching methodology more appealing to my students, I need to avoid topics such as eating pork and extra-marital relationships. Richards (1998:125) states that cultural sensitivity has become a significant criterion in today's EFL industry. Freebairn (2000:3) points out that a brilliant coursebook can be dismissed on grounds of a single reference to a culturally sensitive issue.

Rule number three: autonomy and learner-centered teaching.

Teaching should never be teacher-centered and teachers should not be looked at as bearers of knowledge and transmitters of information. Students have to consider themselves part and parcel of the school system. They have to enjoy their lessons and love coming to their school. Good Methodology should cater for learners' needs and different learning styles. Students' curiosity is one of these basic needs. Albert Einstein once said that it must be a miracle for curiosity to withstand the oppression of formal schooling because once curiosity in children is suffocated, we cannot expect to produce any scientists, inventors, astronauts, or simply any successful teachers. Sadly enough the Arab world has very few of those. To achieve this state of autonomy and independent learning, some techniques can be adopted such as:

- Assigning different projects to different students based on their own interests.
- Providing students with a further reading section that could include a list of websites, books or any other resources for further reading after each unit or even at the end of a lesson.

Other recommendations:

- Adopt a learner-centered methodology which involves more collaborative learning, group work, challenge and critical thinking tasks.

- Get your students realize that what matters is what they learn not what marks they get. We need to get rid of the culture of high stakes exams and rote learning.
- Never judge your students according to their race, social background and financial status.
- Do not be a Luddite and try to integrate technology with teaching methodology. Glass and Vrasidas (2005:4) note that technology in this age is central in school reform. I think, in my context, e-learning is well-practised. Two projects are now running at my school, the Knowledge Net Portal and the E-school bag project.
- Put emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language. David Nunan (1991:279) sees this as an enhancement of the learner's personal experience and an important contributing element to classroom learning.
- Teachers should open doors and trigger innovation instead of yelling, shouting and preaching students.
- When deciding what teaching method to use, a teacher will need to consider students' background knowledge, environment, and learning goals. variety of strategies and methods should be used to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn.

7. CONCLUSION:

In this paper, I have tried to shed light on teaching English in the Qatari context. I have explored my students' attitude towards English through a short survey. My survey shows generally positive attitudes towards English among my students. My paper draws conclusions about the powerful impact of the socio-cultural setting of the language classroom on the most appropriate methodology to be used and on students' attitudes towards learning the language and consequently the outcomes. I hope that my discussion of the best practices and my recommendations at the end, which are based on my own experience, will help my colleagues.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allwright, D. (1995) "*Contextual Factors In Classroom Language Learning: An Overview*" Summer Institute in English and Applied Linguistics, University of Cambridge,
- Asraf, R. (2005) "English and Islam: A clash of civilizations" *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 4/2, 103–118
- Cleary, J (1996) "Can theories of 'linguistic imperialism' be falsified? Attitudes to English in a Malaysian university" *Proceedings of the Edinburgh Linguistics Department*
- Congreve, A. (2004) "**Linguistic Attitudes of Students** Towards Arabic and English" University English Program, King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals. Saudi Arabia
- Freebairn, I. (2000) "The coursebook-future continuous or past?" *English Teaching Professional*, 15, 3-5.
- Glass, V. and Vrasidas, C. (2005) *Preparing Teachers To Teach With Technology*: Information Age Publishing
- Glisan, E. Drescher, V. (1993) "Textbook Grammar: Does It Reflect Native Speaker Speech?" *The Modern Language Journal*, 77/1, 23-33.
- Karmani, S. (2005) "Islam and English in the Post-9/11 Era: Introduction" *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 4/2, 85–86.
- Lamontagne , M. (2005) "Communities of Practice in an Arabic Culture: Wenger's Model and the United Arab Emirates Implications for Online Learning" *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE*, 6/3, 9-30.
- Malallah, S. (2000) "English in an Arabic Environment: Current Attitudes to English among Kuwait University Students" *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 3/1, 19-43.
- Pemberton, R. (2007) "Independent Learning Schemes: A Practical Approach" *ELT Journal*, 61/4, 385-88.
- Rahman, T. (2005) "The Muslim Response to English in South Asia: With Special Reference to Inequality, Intolerance, and Militancy in Pakistan" *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 2(4), 119–135
- Richards, J (1998) *Beyond Training*. Cambridge University Press
- Shaaban, K. and Ghaith, G. (2003) "Effect of Religion, First Foreign Language, and Gender on the Perception of the Utility of Language" *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 2/1, 53–77.
- Sorrell, M. (2003) "One Size Doesn't Fit All" *Wall Street Journal*, 1-Oct.-2003

Syed, Z. (2003) "TESOL in the Gulf: The Sociocultural Context of English Language Teaching in the Gulf" *TESOL Quarterly*, 37/2, 237-241.

Tudor, I. (2001) *The Dynamics of the Language Classroom*: Cambridge University Press

(2003) *Views of a changing world*: the Pew Global Attitudes Project. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. Retrieved March 14, 2008 from

<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=185>

APPENDIX 1

Malallah's study, (2000). Kuwait.

Table 1 Attitudes to learning English

	<i>SA</i> %	<i>A</i> %	<i>NAND</i> %	<i>D</i> %	<i>SD</i> %
1. I feel that learning English is useful for me	69.4	24.2	2.9	1.7	1.7
5. I dislike learning English	4.9	5.2	7.9	27.0	55.0
6. I would like to learn as much English as possible	58.4	27.3	5.7	6.2	2.5
7. I would rather spend my time on subjects other than English	16.0	25.6	17.4	29.2	11.8
8. I love learning English	47.3	36.0	6.6	6.4	3.7
9. Learning English is a waste of time	2.0	2.9	5.9	29.8	59.4
10. I plan to continue learning English	22.2	22.7	30.5	15.5	9.1
11. It is of no benefit for me to learn English	1.2	2.2	5.1	30.8	60.6
12. When I leave University, I shall give up the study of English entirely	8.3	8.6	33.7	21.8	27.6

Table 2 Attitudes toward the English language

	<i>SA</i> %	<i>A</i> %	<i>NAND</i> %	<i>D</i> %	<i>SD</i> %
1. I find the English language interesting	39.4	40.1	9.5	5.9	5.1
2. I don't like speaking English	4.7	10.6	7.6	44.2	32.9
6. I don't like watching Channel 2 on TV because it shows English only programmes	7.4	7.1	10.3	36.9	38.2
7. I find the English language easy	12.1	41.6	15.1	21.3	9.9
8. I prefer the English language to the Arabic language	9.9	9.6	12.8	35.5	32.3
9. I find the English language boring	3.9	9.4	11.8	45.6	29.3
10. I find speaking English is prestigious	22.6	32.5	13.4	16.9	14.6
11. When I speak English, I feel that I'm more educated"	29.9	38.2	11.5	9.3	11.0
12. I hope to put my children in a private English school so that they speak English fluently	36.4	22.5	9.5	8.6	23.0

Table 4 The purpose of studying English

	SA %	A %	NAND %	D %	SD %
1. Allows me to be more at ease in the English-speaking community	18.9	28.9	11.5	24.0	16.7
2. To get a good job	25.6	45.2	17.0	8.1	4.2
3. Allows me to meet with varied people	32.2	53.0	8.9	4.0	2.0
4. Makes me a more educated person	35.0	44.6	8.4	7.9	4.2
6. Other people will respect me more if I have a knowledge of English	22.1	28.7	23.0	17.6	8.6
7. Allows me to have more friends	24.4	43.8	18.5	8.4	4.9
8. To continue my postgraduate studies at a foreign University	35.6	32.9	12.8	8.6	10.1
9. Be able to participate more freely in the activities of English speaking cultural groups	24.4	38.3	21.2	9.6	6.4
10. Enable me to communicate with my servants	28.9	60.5	3.9	3.9	2.7
11. Enable me to read the English instructions written on medicines, goods and industrial imports	57.2	39.3	2.5	0.5	0.5
12. Think and behave like English-speaking people	17.4	24.8	20.1	23.3	14.3
13. To pass my exams and graduate from the university	40.2	40.9	11.8	5.4	1.0

Table 5 The place of English in Kuwait society

	SA %	A %	NAND %	D %	SD %
1. There is no use in Kuwait for the English Language	4.9	6.1	6.6	44.0	38.3
2. The English language is the language of prestige in Kuwait	24.5	42.8	12.4	14.4	5.9
3. There is no need to learn English in Kuwait	2.0	2.2	4.4	39.7	51.7
4. Many Kuwaiti parents put their children in private English schools so that they will speak English fluently	35.4	35.4	10.8	11.5	6.9
5. It is difficult for someone to learn the English language in Kuwait	4.9	13.5	9.1	52.6	19.9
6. Talking in English is prestigious in Kuwait	18.2	31.5	21.4	17.5	11.3
7. Learning English enables Kuwaities to communicate with others abroad	58.7	37.8	1.0	0.7	1.7
8. The English Language in Kuwait will harm the Arabic language	10.8	15.2	16.0	43.2	14.7
9. Graduates from private English schools in Kuwait deserve to gain better job opportunities than graduates from public schools	15.3	14.0	14.3	27.6	28.8

APPENDIX 2

Shaaban's Study, Lebanon. (2003)

TABLE 7
Percentages of Responses to Attitudes Towards Language in
Education and Society

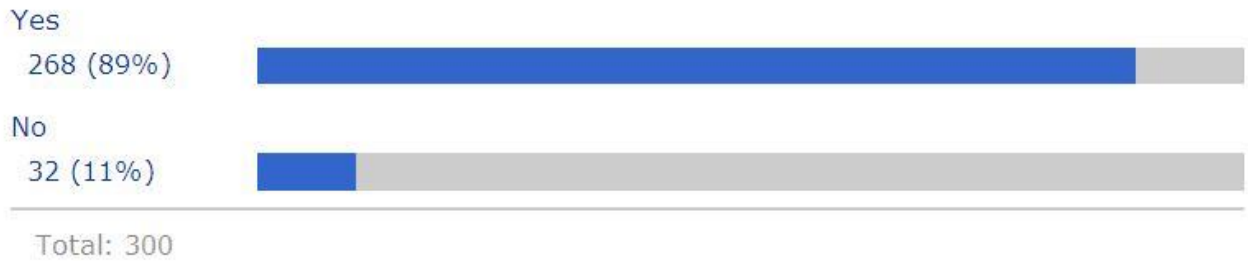
	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
21. Students would learn sciences and mathematics better if the language of instruction were Arabic.	2.3	8.1	21.0	32.7	36.4
22. Teaching sciences and mathematics in French/English beginning in the Elementary is necessary for success in the university.	26.7	47.7	15.9	6.8	2.8
23. I believe that the Lebanese prefer using Arabic for their daily communication, French for cultural matters, and English for business, technology, and sciences.	26.7	52.3	13.1	4.7	0.6
24. Standard Arabic is very difficult because it is not a spoken language.	15.3	44.9	6.8	20.5	12.5
25. Arabic could serve as an efficient language of instruction in all school subjects, including mathematics and sciences.	10.2	24.4	21.1	30.1	14.2
26. Using French/English as a medium of instruction weakens the Arab cultural identity of students.	11.9	23.3	15.9	27.3	21.0

APPENDIX 3

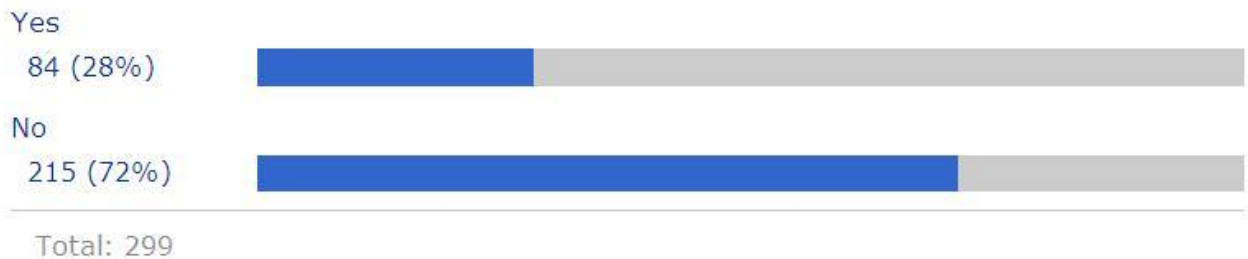
My study, Qatar. (2008)

Omar bin AlKhattab Preparatory School for Boys

1. Do you like English Language?



2. Do you feel shy when you speak English?



3. Having good English is important to have a good job.



4. English language is -----



5. I like Arabic more than English.



Total: 299

6. I like English speakers.



Total: 299

7. Do you enjoy learning English?



Total: 299

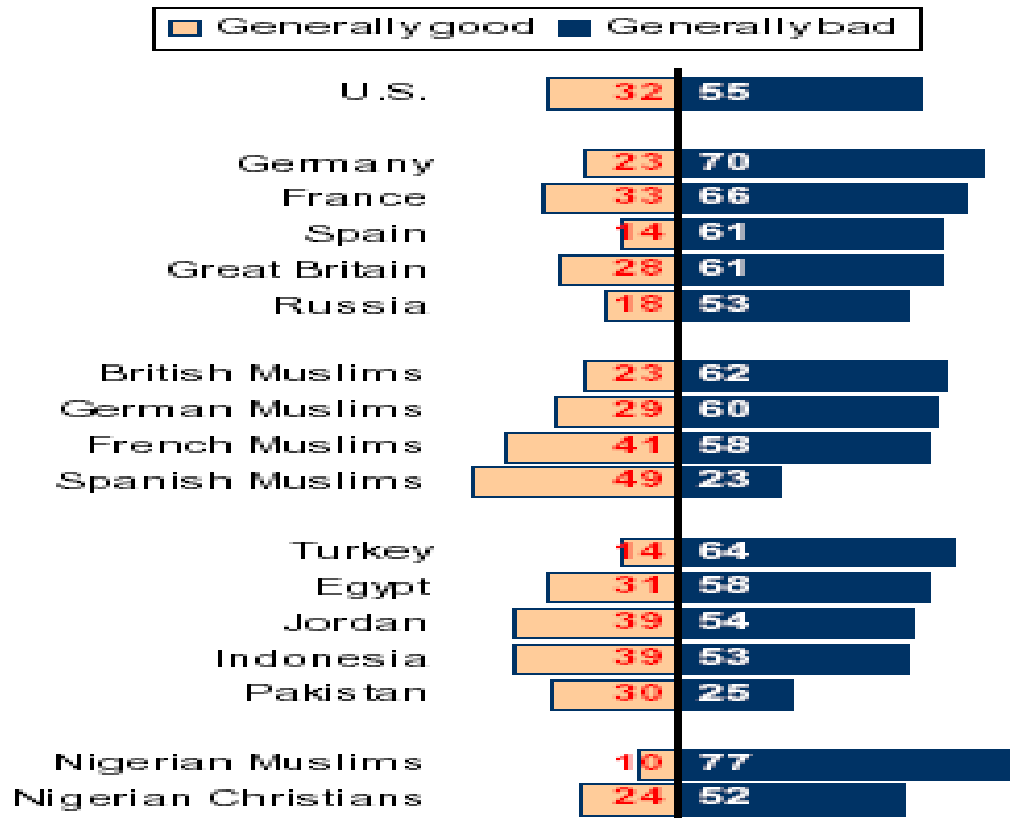
8. Learning Grammar is very important to speak good English



APPENDIX 4

“The Pew Center June 22, 2006”

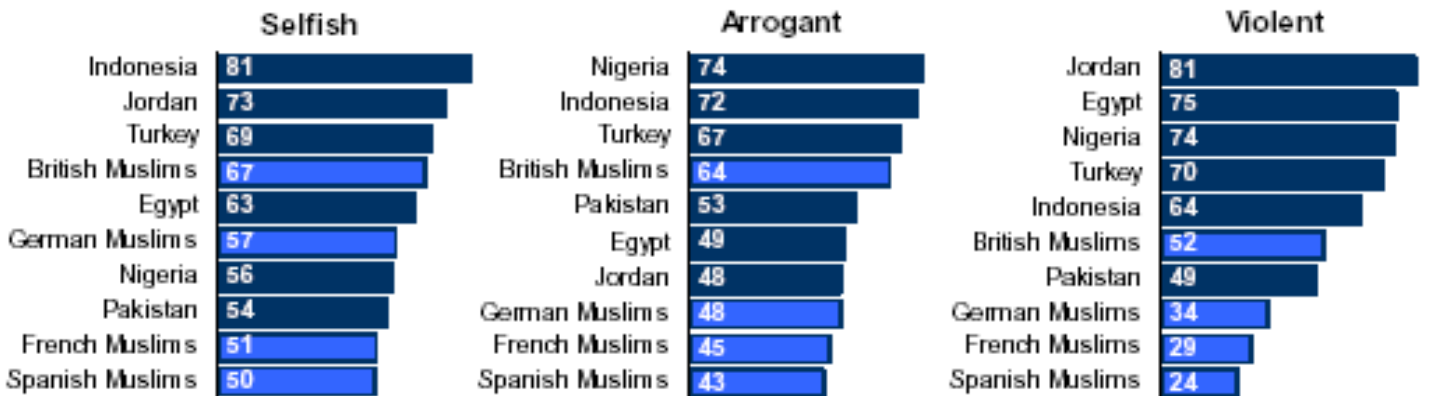
Relations Between Muslims and Westerners



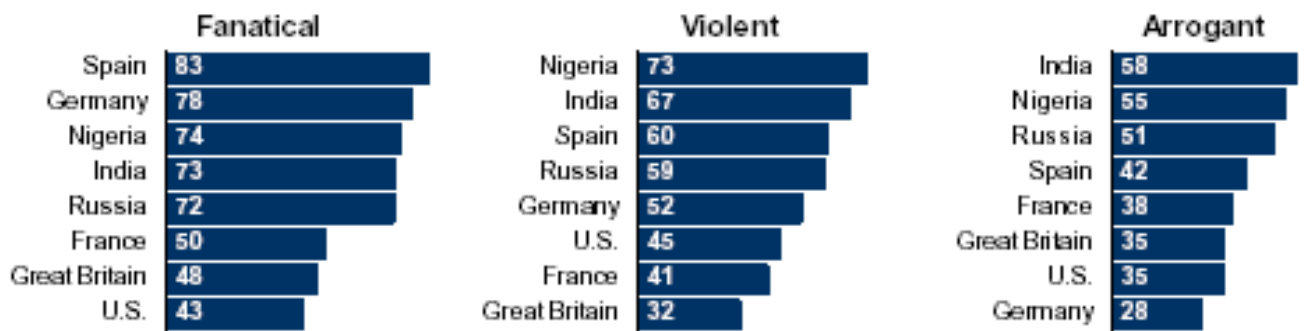
The graph below shows how both sides look at each other

Negative Traits Muslims and Non-Muslims See in One Another

Negative Characteristics Muslims Associate with People in Western Countries*



Negative Characteristics Non-Muslims Associate with Muslims*



*Top three traits of six negative traits tested. Lighter shading indicates Muslim subpopulations within Western European countries. In Pakistan, the percentage of Don't Know/Refused responses ranges from 28% to 31% on these characteristics. Nigerian Muslims asked about "people in Western countries," Nigerian non-Muslims asked about "Muslims."