

# Teaching English in the United Arab Emirates

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Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) Schools, United Arab Emirates

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## My Home

### Al-Ruwais, United Arab Emirates

When I mention that I live in the UAE, images and stories of the tallest *this* and the biggest *that* are often the topics of choice for the conversation. After all, not only have the UAE constructed the world's tallest building, the famous Burj Khalifa, but also the world's tallest chocolate sculpture of that same building, which I affectionately dubbed the Burj Chokolifa. This is indeed a nation of superlatives. The Emir of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum once said, "We, in the UAE, have no such word as "impossible"; it does not exist in our lexicon." Although this lexicon bit would have been fair game for a debate in my former Semantics course (I sense a sigh from my semantic professor), I have become convinced of this statement. This infrastructural ideology that regards "impossible" as taboo often teeters wonderfully on the eccentric to the outright absurd. The city where I live is no exception.

Less than forty years ago, Al-Ruwais simply did not exist. It was nothing more than a concept of plans and discussions to transform a vast area of lonely desert into a model city. Now, it is a beautiful place with palm-tree lined avenues, flower gardens, international schools, and a perfect grid pattern of modern housing developments with an Arabesque touch. The city is located 240 km outside of Abu Dhabi, sandwiched between the empty dunes of the Arabian Desert and the calm, crystal-blue waters of the Arabian Gulf. Ruwais is still a smaller city though, a place where you run into students while selecting mangoes at the grocery store, and the cashier knows just a little too much info about you. In spite of the small town feel, our brand new mall came equipped with four coffee shops and an ice-skating rink. An ice-skating rink in the middle of the desert, why? The better question is "Why not?" This is the UAE.



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## **ADNOC Schools**

The school where I teach is called ADNOC Schools. The school's name is an acronym of the name of the school's owner – Abu Dhabi National Oil Company. Yes, oil does drive this beast, and I am employed by the country's giant behind the wheel. Although the school has only existed for a few years, it has developed into an exceptional place for learning that meets and often exceeds international standards. It follows an American curriculum and is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education from the United States. There are campuses in four cities of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi with the head office located in Abu Dhabi. The campus in Ruwais provides a K-12 education and is divided into an elementary campus, female high school campus, and male high school campus. ADNOC Schools is truly international by any standard. My students come from many different countries with very diverse backgrounds. The school in this respect is a microcosm of the UAE itself, as 80% of the people living here are expats from other countries. Although Arabic is the official language of the country, English is the *lingua franca* due to the great diversity.

Last year, I taught both female and male students in grades six, seven, eight, and nine, but this year I teach only sixth grade at the male campus. Generally speaking, my students are curious, respectful, and participatory. They take joy in the challenge of the learning process. In the English department, there are a total of nine teachers, and we come from six different countries. The difference in nationalities definitely provides a healthy dosage of data for a would-be journal article in Discourse Analysis, as agreements are never quite reached on how to correctly pronounce the word *schedule* or which side of the pond has produced better poetry. In spite of the great passport divide, we all have reached the agreement that the amenable debates on these pesky pronunciation nuances are best served with coffee, which is provided at no expense in the teacher's lounge.

In addition to teaching literature and language arts, I have also taken on other roles in the school. Once a week, I enlighten a small group of students on the finer side of American culture – rock-n-roll *a la* guitar. After an hour set of tunes stretching from the 90s punk scene to contemporary sounds, the guitar club reaches a therapeutic happy place, complete with sore finger tips and loud yelling since everyone has proudly become temporarily deaf. “What? No, I said that was fun! Not to play another one... What?”

I also have duty six times a week, split between the outdoor courtyard, library, and cafeteria. At first, being on duty felt a bit like cattle herding (Mooove!), but over time these twenty-minute sessions have become quite enjoyable and surprisingly entertaining. They provide light-hearted moments to get to know the kids better outside of the classroom environment. It has become my daily catch-up on the coolest apps for an iPad, comical stories of student vacation mishaps, and insight into the latest school gossip. Not to be forgotten, at times I also need the support of the world's smallest violin to accompany the tear-dropped woeful melody of “too many exams that are just too hard.”

## **Lessons in Teaching**

### **The First Five Minutes**

Harry Wong got it right when he said, “The number one problem in the classroom is not discipline; it is the lack of procedures and routines.” This is most true for the first five minutes of a class. What the students do immediately when they walk in the door will set the tone for either success or failure.

In order to avoid the latter, it is essential to have an opening routine. For my 6<sup>th</sup> graders this year, I greet them individually in the hallway. Once they walk in, they know exactly what they need to do, and they consistently do it successfully. It's really quite simple, too.

First, I always have a task on the board. Although it may vary depending on the content, the format of the task never changes. This is important because I do not want the students wasting their time staring at the board trying to figure out what they need to do. Usually, I give them a set of questions that relate to the previous lesson. In addition, I am consistent. I do not even take a one-day break from the opener. Furthermore, I always have a timer set. This way, the students know exactly how long they have to complete the task, and it puts a sense of pressure on them to complete it. For the amount of time, I do not give much. Although it may seem a little cruel, the pressure is then greater to complete the task, and I have found that the students enjoy the challenge. When the time is up, I do not give any extension, and all students must stop writing. Having the timer is helpful for me too for pacing the lesson. While the students complete the opener, I then take care of housekeeping duties, such as typing in attendance and conferencing with the student whose score on the last assessment was less than desirable. Lastly, after the task, I give time for small group discussion so the students can learn and share with their peers.

Although a successful opener does set the tone of a class, management does not stop there. I have routines and procedures for all aspects of the class. In order to make my classes more efficient, I created a list of ways that time is wasted. I then made procedures to take care of these issues. For example, to avoid the “look at me and give me a high-five because I just made a basket” trash bin distraction, students in my class are not allowed to throw away trash during the lesson. This even includes pencil shavings from sharpening a pencil. They must keep it at their desk and throw it away after. Interestingly enough, after implementing this rule, there was a noticeable reduction in the amount of pencils being sharpened. Although this is a seemingly minor procedure, it does save the class from unnecessary distractions.

### **Wall Decorations Do Make A Difference**

In 1999, I was taking undergraduate Spanish courses at the university. My professor utilized every inch of space on the wall for something related to culture or language. I remember it being highly inspirational. There were Mexican masks, paintings of picturesque plazas, movie posters, images of flamenco, and pictures of famous paintings by Velasquez and Goya. I knew that this was something that I wanted to do once I became a teacher. To explain how I integrate wall decoration, I'll provide an anecdote of a student from this year.

In the first trimester, my students covered a unit on poetry. I decided to utilize the walls outside of the room for poems written by the students. They really do care about their work being displayed. When I first told the students that I would be placing their original poems on the outside wall, some became nervous. At the end of that class, I had them write a brief exit reflection on how they felt about their work being seen by any random passerby. Some haplessly begged me to choose their work, whilst others were clearly against any such notion. One particular student with a notably poor academic record wrote something similar to “Please sir, don't! Don't do it! No!” followed by depressing excuses and an attempted spelling of the word “anonymous.” I spoke to him about it, and he said that he didn't like poetry or know enough about it. I then reassured him that with a little practice and reading, he would be fine. I also had to correct him that poetry in fact was not just for girls as he had thought. He didn't seem convinced. If you have ever taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade boys (or even

been around them for any length of time), you'll understand that his logic made perfect sense – to him.

That day after school, I made some changes. I decorated the wall closest to the student's desk with a selection of poems and color prints of renowned poets. Something rather interesting happened. Students began taking greater interest in poetry. In particular, the student who I had spoken to the day before even stayed after class to look at the pictures and read the poems on the wall. I told him, "See - Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, and William Carlos Williams are definitely not girls." He laughed.



Photo: Aaron and the "Wall of poetry" at his school

After a week, he came to me with questions about the poets. I was both surprised and a little suspicious of his intentions. I gave him a little background information on the poets along with suggestions of additional poems to read. The next day, he was smiling big and said he wanted to tell me something. I said, "Ok," and prepared myself for a far-fetched story of how his homework blew away in a sandstorm, but instead, he told me that he had memorized one of the poems on the wall. Even more, he asked if he could recite it in front of the class. I was speechless – literally. After all, this is a student who would not normally be one to volunteer for such an undertaking. Since his assessment scores were low, I even decided to give him credit for his effort. I told him that if he did a good job and recited it without pausing or reading any notes, then I would give him five bonus points on a quiz. I gave him two days to prepare.

On the day of the recitation, we did a brief activity in class to read the poem so that the students would be familiar with it. When I told the class that he would be reciting a poem, it would be an understatement to say that no one believed in his ability to accomplish this task – except me. One of my brighter students in the class even called me over to his desk and whispered to me, "Mr. Aaron, are you sure you want to do this?" There was no going back now.

He was visibly nervous when he stood in front of the class. Before he started, he told the class that he had never done anything like this before. The class became silent. There was a pause that

seemed longer than it probably was. All eyes were on him. He began speaking. Not only did he recite the poem, but he did so fluidly without looking at any notes. The class applauded his efforts, and he was in the limelight for the day.

The recitation changed his attitude in the class, and I began to see more effort on his part. He even passed the following assessment. Sometime after, I had a conference with his father who was concerned about his performance. It was good to have something positive to talk about in the meeting. I was able to explain how I had seen a change in heart in his son. When I told his father about how he recited the poem in front of the class, he couldn't believe it. He asked to see the poem that his son had recited, and I showed it to him. He was visually proud of his son, and he thanked me for the additional effort and support that I was giving. After school that day, I went to Starbucks to treat myself for my little victory. Over my cappuccino, I reflected on how this entire occurrence happened simply because I decorated the wall closest to his desk – with poets that were not girls.

### **Standards of Living and Cultural Differences**

#### **Not Everywhere Is The Same**

Over the past decade, I've come to understand quite well that not all locations for international teaching give equal pay or benefits. For example, when I taught for Fulbright in Quito, Ecuador, for two years in my first post abroad, I lived in poverty. Nevertheless, I was single and in my mid-twenties. Although my salary barely covered the rent, the negative points were outweighed. I was living out my dream in a beautiful city in South America and gaining excellent experience teaching at Fulbright. I also had the opportunity to speak Spanish on a daily basis, utilizing the language which I had worked so hard to learn. When I moved to Taiwan to teach at an American boarding school, living conditions greatly improved. I was finally able to actually eat at T.G.I. Friday's instead of salivating from the street. I even had my own transportation, albeit an old moped. I was also able to travel extensively throughout Southeast Asia. Learning how to speak Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan was a much greater challenge than Spanish, but it was very enjoyable to study and practice.

Here in the UAE, life has continued to improve, and there are quite a few notable benefits. For example, when I first arrived, I was put up in a five-star hotel for a month in Abu Dhabi with all meals included. When asked, it felt a little awkward to say, "Yes, I'm currently living in this hotel, and yes, I am a teacher." At dinner, I'd have to grapple with the dilemma of indulging in lobster, steak, or both. After my clothes started fitting a little tight though, I made the prudent decision to cut back to just two trips to the buffet. Eventually, I was provided with an apartment in a new mid-rise building. In addition, ADNOC offers interest-free car loans to employees, so a few months ago I was able to purchase a brand new SUV with 4-wheel drive. This definitely ameliorated living standards, as I was finally able to fulfill my fantasy of traversing the sand dunes off-road on the way to the beach.

#### **Cultural Cues**

Over the years, I have lost count of how many times life abroad has deposited me in the most random of situations. My comfort zone has been tested, and I have experienced culture shock. I have tried foods which I had previously never considered a food. For example, just a few weeks after arriving to the UAE for the first time, I was offered camel milk at a social gathering. Of course, one cannot say no to such an offering. Another time, I was with my wife and daughter in the middle of nowhere by the camel farms. I motioned to one of the camel herders if I could take a picture. After a few minutes time, there were a group of local Arabs talking to us. It was a very friendly exchange,

and they invited us to their house. My wife was a little nervous, but these were Bedouin Arabs from the UAE. They are quite possibly the most welcoming people that I have ever met in my travels, and I reassured her that they could be trusted. We then followed them off the road and onto a path in the sand. When we arrived, they brought us to a set of cushions and carpets directly under the stars. There was a mosque at the site, and they then excused themselves for prayer. When they returned, they brought dates, strong Arabic coffee, and Arabic tea. It ended up being a delightful evening and an experience that we won't forget.

I have come to understand that living abroad requires a bit of patience, an open mind, and at times a leap of faith. Although it has not always been easy, I have been able to adapt to each place where I have lived and taught. I have learned that it's best to take heart and try to adapt myself (within reason, of course) instead of expecting the rest of society to adapt to me. Here in Ruwais, I have managed to etch out a niche for myself in the fabric of society. Although the UAE does offer many Western amenities, it is still a socially conservative country in the Middle East. Along with the UAE, we have been able to travel to other countries in the region, such as Oman, Bahrain, and Turkey. I have found that if I am respectful of local customs, I will gain respect in return.