

# TEACHING IN DIFFERENT TONGUES

GENERATING GREATER STUDENT UNDERSTANDING BY SHARPENING TEACHER AWARENESS

**V**eteran safety trainers David Towison and Hasan Alaradi from RRC outline the many considerations to weigh up when teaching another culture.

Sometimes teachers just make no sense at all. That shouldn't surprise you. It happens in all human and animal interactions. When I was a child, I just couldn't make my pet fish understand how much I loved him.

## Communication is key

Teaching and learning relies on good communication between teacher and student – whether that's a physical teacher in front of a class or the distillation of their wisdom in a book or video. As well as show you how much they know (teachers know too much), one of the main things that teachers try to do is create opportunities to check understanding and correct misunderstandings. They do this all the time in class rooms, by asking you endless questions. You get questions in textbooks and e-learning too, but they're usually called quizzes.

## Beyond the obvious

If you're being taught in your native language, such as Arabic, misunderstandings still happen but they're usually easily corrected. You can approach the problem in many ways, using the full richness of your native tongue.

Communication is not just about language; it's also about assumptions we have. Having a shared cultural heritage/reference can make communication richer and easier.

In Health and Safety teaching in the Middle East, there are some examples of this, such as when the NEBOSH H&S Award is taught and examined in Arabic (as well as in English) by native Arabic speaking teachers.

A common scenario is where Arabic speaking students are being taught in English by native English speakers – inevitably having Western terms of reference. For the students, English may be their second or third language. There are also few shared cultural references which could otherwise make communications easier.

## Assessing for success

Standard tests like the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) are commonly used to assess student proficiency in English. Setting a minimum entry standard can help, but again, this is not always possible



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to do before a course. Neither is it at all common in commercial training. More usually, students have a wide range of proficiencies in English.

For those who are not so proficient, there may be an embarrassment factor too. A person who may be intelligent and extremely confident when speaking their native language may appear shy, uninterested or uninvolved in lessons conducted in a second language.

Teachers have to be alert to this and not assume, by the lack of questions from their students, that everything is understood. A good teacher should try hard to check students have understood and involve them, whatever their language.

This extends to learning a little about their culture, so appropriate examples can be used to make the point in a more effective way. If I had tried this with my pet fish, I'm sure he would have appreciated it.

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