

SCIENTIFIC INTERVIEW:

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR ALI H. RADDAOUI ON HIS TEACHING EXPERIENCE IN MULTICULTURAL CLASSES

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Our guest is Professor Ali H. Raddaoui, has served as a teacher and researcher at several tertiary institutions in different countries such as Tunisia, the USA, and Saudi Arabia. In most of these institutions, awareness of the multicultural component constitutes a critical piece of their visions and values. Multiculturalism and multicultural education have gathered momentum in contemporary educational circles. Hence, academic institutions attempt to meet the challenging requirements of the new dimensions of complexity and practicality as ethnic demographics, social conditions, and political circumstances continue to change. The emergence of new technologies in education, together with the increasing cultural diversity of global educational contexts, has created a vibrant mix of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and experiential plurality. In this context, the appraisal of collective and individual experiences of teaching and learning within multicultural settings looms large in contemporary academia.

Dr. Raddaoui's academic career offered him genuine opportunities to experience multicultural education from his perspectives as a teacher, educator, researcher, and a world citizen. Rather than providing generalizations on multicultural education, Dr. Raddaoui takes his English teaching career as a starting point and shares his experience with multiculturalism from this specific angle. Recently, he has moved to the private sector and has founded IDIOMOPTIMA. This project reflects his multilingual and multicultural identity and offers language services in the three world languages: Arabic, French, and English.

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HZ: Welcome, Dr. Raddaoui. Please introduce yourself and your research.

AHR: Except for a few digressions from my path as a scholar-cum-practitioner, my research and scholarly activities have consistently focused on three interconnected areas that I summarize as follows: (i) language pedagogy, (ii) researcher identity, and (iii) the impacts of globalization and technology on education. My training is primarily in applied linguistics with special emphasis on language teaching and learning. Throughout my career, I have taught three world languages, Arabic, French, and mostly English to speakers of other languages. In my research, I approach the issues above from the vantage points of my multiple identities as a learner, teacher, and researcher. I critically consider the targets, tools, and implications of (language) learning and teaching in an interconnected, multicultural world.

For the most part, my research dwells on best practices in language teaching. In doing this, my goal has been to re-conceptualize, amid a theoretic and pedagogic glut, what I believe are worthy learning goals, strategies, and methods. Since the mid-seventies, Communicative Language Teaching occupied pride of a place in English language teaching circles. Without questioning its merit as a language teaching agenda, I argue against considering it a sacred cow in the language teacher's toolbox, and I call for integrating creative and critical thinking, Bloom's taxonomy, and Webb's Depth of Knowledge levels into language teaching pedagogy and curriculum design. Teachers should expend pedagogic and theoretic language teaching energy to develop strategies that mirror the psychological processes in the learner's mind and the learning that take place within and across communities. For me, the supreme goal of language learning is to develop written, oral (and now digital) fluency. This fluency is the ticket for learners to become producers, to represent themselves, and to contribute their own images to the already extant global kaleidoscope.

With the research agenda above, which is mostly focused on language pedagogy in the confines of the classroom, I have worked on a larger programmatic plan where I think critically about my job and identity as an English language learner turned teacher in the global marketplace. The issues I debated center on the privileged place of the native speaker of English as a norm setter both in theoretical linguistic analysis as well as in the applied branch concerned with English Language Teaching (ELT) as a profession and as a business. Learners, parents, linguists, recruiters, and publishers base the teaching of English on this standard. The vertical and horizontal global spread of English outside its traditional habitats competes against this perception. It militates against this presumably homogeneous,

normative representation. Nonnative speakers, teachers, and users of English generate variation and change and have become a strong force to be reckoned with. I go against the grain and argue against the traditional view of language as being encapsulated in a perfect, monolingual speaker of English, and delineate the contours of the intercultural, ‚ideal speaker‘ in the global village who is a proud speaker of their native language, but also is intercultural and bi/multilingual.

Globalization brings to the fore more than language and language education issues. For me, a central area of investigation has been to describe, examine, and ponder another impact of globalization, which is the import of technologically-enhanced learning. As teachers of language and of any other content area, we owe it to ourselves to tame the ‚technology beast‘ and not let ourselves be overpowered by it. We need to strike this emerging interdisciplinary balance between our content areas and technology while preventing technology from becoming the centerpiece and driver of our professions.

It is interesting to note that on a world scale, technological gadgets, e-learning, and social media have found easier and wider adoption outside education and at the social level. The effects of technological proliferation are staggering. The previous paradigm, where information, content authoring, and knowledge production were monopolized by elites in religion, education, science, and publishing, has suddenly shifted. Regular, networked netizens, have become in possession of powerful tools resulting in what appears to be a democratizing trend of knowledge construction.

In much of my research, I observe, describe, and ask critical questions about my profession, its goals, and its tools. I also reflect on my place and identity as a reflective practitioner. This has led me to investigate the broader theoretical and practical implications of language learning and teaching for linguistic standards, pedagogies, and goals in the classroom and in the global village, taking account of the massive transformations globalization and technology are effecting at the levels of formal teaching and the largely unmonitored social e-learning.

HZ: What sparked your interest in the multiculturalism field, and research and academia in general?

AHR: I am a trained English language teacher. Learning about, adapting, and experimenting with new pedagogies, approaches, theories, and methods is my mantra. However, being a nonnative speaker of English myself, I found out, early on in my career, that learners, administrators, and parents expect the learning of

English to be equated with learning about things English, American, maybe Australian, things from what the late Indian linguist Braj Kachru called ‚the inner circle’. Approaching the teaching of English with the promise that they learn essentially native-speaker English is not only limiting, but also socially irresponsible. If English is to be the lingua franca of the world, then for the education system, curriculum writers, textbook developers, and teachers to sell this international medium of communication as being restricted to the English of the inner circle is a non-starter. The teaching of English has to borrow from intercultural and multicultural education in a way that makes it serve as a language of international communication.

HZ: Describe your teaching experience. What is your teaching philosophy?

AHR: Perhaps another reason why I am a firm believer in pushing multicultural education and the notion of the intercultural speaker is that during my teaching career, I have worked in four continents and was exposed to teaching practices in six countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and America. Here is how I typically introduce myself on various occasions, including my job applications: I am a dependable, mission-oriented, multilingual, Arab-American academic with a multicultural outlook developed over many years of teaching, living, and serving in diverse linguistic and cultural locales. Having learned and taught three world languages, Arabic, English, and French, I know that language learning, devoid of the cultural element, almost always produces people who may be good at stringing words to make correct sentences. However, teaching culture-free language courses is a non-sequitur. Language is host to cultural meanings that partly determine how we see and dissect the world, near and far. Such a conception of language, though, is not enough, for it assumes that the language taught has a corresponding homogeneous speech community. There is nothing farther from the truth. There is standard language, and there are the dialects of the language. However much we may want to think of the dialects as falling under that one specific standard language, it will be difficult to ascertain that the speakers of those dialects closely associate themselves with the speakers of the standard language or even the speakers of other dialects. At the periphery, one language in country x finds its extension in country y, but it happens to have a different name. In fact, one language may find reverberations and echoes in faraway places, locales, and countries, with the implication that it has become the carrier of different cultures, to the extent, as I said, of even acquiring a different name.

My teaching is guided by several principles and theories that I continually strive to put in practice, observe, analyze and critique to continue to improve my teaching

and to make sure it is never boxed in a limited, fixed, formula-type recipe. I often refer to myself as a facilitator, educator, and coach, an intercultural speaker, rather than as a teacher or instructor. Instead of telling learners about things to remember and reproduce, as is often done in the transmission model, I aim to create a comfortable and encouraging atmosphere of interaction and communication with no place for any type of threat. In all of this, I hope to stand as an example of someone whose questions are answered through negotiation rather than through decree and dictation. I always take account of the fact that students in many of my classes come from diverse backgrounds and carry with them *Vetanchuangs* they are most privy to. This is an excellent opportunity to entice them to share their views with others, to explain them, and, most importantly, to celebrate them. In this way, my class sort of becomes and multicultural lab where there is not a dominant group or streak, but as much as possible, students are given privileged access to each other's cultures.

For me as an educator, I take it upon myself to provide them with the necessary props and scaffolds so they can go beyond their current state of knowledge. In this exercise, they learn to value the results of free guided thinking and the importance of their own prior knowledge and experience. When learners are thus appreciated for what they know, they tend to treat themselves and their peers as legitimate and worthy sources of knowledge, and it is this knowledge that they will stir, describe, enrich, formulate and present so they learn to represent themselves, their cultures, and the world around them. This ability to represent and self-represent is most conducive to creating a multicultural environment.

HZ: What is your perception of multicultural education?

AHR: Multicultural education is an opportunity to break the monotony of a syllabus that is almost always designed by experts who see the world through the prism of their single, limited, and limiting area of specialization. Central to my understanding of multicultural education is the very concept of dividing the learner's syllabus at any grade into separate classes. Students study physics, geography, biology, physical education, poetry, philosophy, etc. Still, they and their teachers, because of the grip of traditional education, tend to see these disciplines almost as islands that do not have bridges linking them. The fact of the matter is that it is difficult to become an expert in an area without being able to create linkages with other areas of knowledge. Also, it is impossible to think of human scientific endeavor in the absence of how this endeavor is lived by those who carry it forward. Knowledge and knowledge construction take place in cultures and in communities. For 21st-century education to succeed, we must make sure students

understand not only raw scientific and knowledge concepts, but also embed them in their cultural settings while recognizing that there is not one dominant cultural setting, but a kaleidoscope of settings which help us see practice in context.

HZ: Describe what you enjoy about teaching multicultural students, and why?

AHR: Correctly conceived, teaching a class of students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds is no less than fulfilling, psychologically, pedagogically, socially, and culturally. There is a syllabus. The syllabus, as I just said, is almost always constructed by experts in the area. So, it is awash with the knowledge that is deemed essential to acquire in that particular field. Having multicultural students in mind and building on a multicultural mindset espoused by the teacher are together going to take understanding, learning, and ownership of the body of knowledge integrated into the syllabus into a whole new level of acquisition and appropriation. For example, by way of warming up the class for a particular lesson or concept, the teacher encourages their students to draw into their respective cultures and talk about the connection between the lesson per se and the understandings, customs, and practices held dear by the members of the students' communities. Managing to elicit three or four answers to such a question is going to enrich the class. It gives those answering the question the feelings that their knowledge is appreciated and that their perceptions of the concept are formally shared with other communities. It may be that there are students among those who are listening who find it challenging to understand pure concepts. Still, the very fact that this concept is being brought to life and made significant from a different cultural perspective is going to help with the saliency of that concept in the sense that, from now on, it is going to be associated with a unique event, which is the sharing of how the concept is practiced by members of other cultural communities.

HZ: How do you approach culturally-sensitive topics in your lecture?

AHR: There are several ways to approach culturally-sensitive topics. Primarily, if the ground rules are laid out from the very beginning, the discomfort associated with culturally-sensitive materials is mitigated. This starts with an initial conversation that the classroom is an open space to discuss all aspects of culture, but this needs to be relativized. As human beings, we are, for the most part, enculturated into believing that the way we practice the cultural components, rites, symbols, and lives is privileged and is a given. It stands to reason that we think of it as correct and standard, and any deviation from this behavior is what it is: a deviation. When students learn to suspend their judgments, to agree to read a text, watch a video, or listen to a text, or listen to a guest speaking about a particular way

of celebrating, mourning, eating, dressing, marrying, and whatnot, then, the scene is already set for the materials (text, audio, video, live presentation) to be shared, for questions to be asked, for looking at what both is common and specific. It seems to me that a wider, more encompassing understanding is arrived at by all. Questions about differences should be permitted, and opinions voiced, without belittling anyone, or imposing a standard version for others to comply with. This is an exercise in mental latitude for the students and the teacher, and it requires a fair amount of training.

HZ: Describe what has been difficult in teaching multicultural students?

AHR: In many teaching circumstances in any given country, there is always a dominant view or a cultural code of conduct dictated by the dominant group. It is safe to assume that in such contexts, there will be a large number of students who “naturally” adopt the view/practice/understanding prevailing in that society, or who have been forced to adopt it since that’s the etiquette followed by the successful group. As a corollary, we will assume the existence of minority groups in that class. They may be minoritized on account of language, race, ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and what have you. The problem, in this case, may arise from introducing aspects of minority cultural practices. This would require the students of the ‘dominant culture’ to be trained into suspending judgments and wearing different binoculars with which they can see, inspect, understand, and eventually accept and celebrate other practices respected by members of that same class who are in the minority. This takes a lot of training and getting used to. Here too, there may be difficulty presenting minority views because it seemingly takes a lot of courage on the part of the culturally minoritized students to come forth and to represent their own practices without fear of being further marginalized or mocked.

HZ: What is the nature of students and the learning process, and how should learning experiences and relationships be organized?

AHR: We could conceive of the learning process as something of linguistic, cognitive, and cultural developmental labs. As a teacher, you have before you a set of students who have been entrusted to your care by the educational and managerial system, by their future employers, by their parents. I hate to liken the process to educational engineering, but it is mostly your own profile as a teacher and another profile you have developed of your ideal student that guide your teaching. So long as your teaching is egalitarian, democratic, all-inclusive, and culturally-sensitive, as a teacher, you will do your best to enlarge each student’s purview and to enlarge the cultural purview of your students as a collectivity, so

they learn to grow and work with each other, regardless of their cultural differentials. You will be a successful teacher when you impart to your students the idea that cultural differences are not only to be accepted but also to be celebrated. Today's and tomorrow's world citizens should assume that diversity is the number one rule of the game. I am not saying that living in a cultural makeup that is largely similar to one's makeup is not desirable; it is indeed desirable, and representing it to the rest of the world is desirable too, but we should learn to interact, do business with, like, and indeed appreciate other modes of life in the conduct of teaching, learning, working, thinking, and making meaning – with the other.

HZ: What do you think about reflections of multicultural education on raising teacher?

AHR: Teacher education from a multicultural perspective is where it all starts. Here, reference is made to the human teacher, not to a culture-free robot. The learning process is a triangle with three points: the curriculum, the teacher, and the learner. The includes organizing principles, ministerial decrees, textbooks, teacher training programs, and actual exercises in the textbook or e-book. The student comes to class with much background knowledge that the teacher should capitalize on to the greatest extent possible. This background knowledge comes in all sizes and shapes, and it is eminently culturally-grounded. It is the teacher, however, that serves as a mediator between the curriculum and the student. If the teacher is not imbued in multicultural education, their teaching will be confined to traditional, subject-specific knowledge, and this will deny students a voice in the learning process. This is why teacher training and retraining remains a crucial aspect of any evolution of education in the direction of embedding multiculturalism in the curriculum.

HZ: In which ways do you aim to diversify the readings and literature to represent the ethnic backgrounds of your students?

AHR: Given that there is no such thing as a homogeneous community, I, as a teacher, should be mindful of how cultural minority students perceive the world around them. With the plethora of materials now available, much more so than in the past, there is no dearth of materials that I can draw into to make sure there is equal representation of all student backgrounds in my class. Even if the syllabus is constructed in such a manner as to allow little or no multiculturalism, my schedule of activities should comprise elements that create a juster world where no one is relegated to a secondary position. Any concept has a history, a standard version of history, and various versions of local histories and accounts. Somewhere on this

world-wide-web is a text, a document, a picture, a graph, a video representing that concept. In practical terms, part of my job will be to unearth these gems and put them on the discussion table. However, what I know is dangerously limited, and I am not the only source of wisdom or knowledge in the group congregating around me as a teacher. Each student, each face, each name, is a repository of knowledge and practices that are often submerged, pushed back, and thwarted by mainstream culture. My job will be to nurture a learning atmosphere where my students dig deep into their knowledge, are proud of it, and learn to introduce it before others, to examine it, and to let others examine it.

HZ: What do you think about the process of designing a multicultural model in education?

AHR: Designing multicultural education should be both a bottom-up and a top-down process. If we accept to wait for multiculturalism to become an educator's household item, on its own, by itself, and to become the accepted, standard, mainstream practice, we may be in for a long wait. At some point, multicultural education has to be decreed and enshrined in the process of education, curriculum design, teacher training activities, and actual classroom practice. On the theoretical front, funds should be allocated, so this new model is introduced on a large scale, explained, vulgarized, and theorized in a way that is accessible to most stakeholders. How the concept is highlighted bottom-up comes in the classroom activities. Teachers who may be implementing this kind of curriculum even without giving it a name should be recognized and rewarded, and their practices demonstrated and publicized. Students, too, should be involved in this program. All students, those belonging to minority or dominant cultures, should be supported and recognized.

HZ: In your experience, what are the key factors that contribute to the success of students from diverse backgrounds?

AHR: My starting point in answering this question about what mostly contributes to the success of students from diverse backgrounds is that "We're all in this together". By this, I mean that to nurture the ideal multicultural profile among students, we should adopt an attitude that defines success not only as individual but also collective. As a teacher, educator, administrator, parent, textbook designer, I should think that for a liberal view of the world to prevail, I should not think of education as a competition ring where my job as a teacher is to surpass the performance of other teachers and that my success as a student means that I am on top of the list. In today's global world, we live together, and my personal success

should not be measured by failure elsewhere. On Noah's proverbial multicultural education ark, all cultures should exist, co-exist on equal footing, and learn from each other. Beyond injecting the multicultural aspect in the syllabus and course description of each discipline, should embed multiculturalism and have it as a guiding principle in the very inception of the syllabus. In more practical terms, the instructors, too, should be retrained, so they incorporate the kind of education that marginalizes or minoritizes no one and no group.

HZ: I sincerely thank Professor Raddaoui for sharing your unique and insightful experience with the audience of the International Journal of Multiculturalism. I would like to think that there are valuable lessons to be learned from your engaging and wide-ranging journey. Thank you for the opportunity to interview, Professor.

AHR: Thank you.

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