

Teaching Culturally-Complex Topics: Nuancing DLIFLC Students' Views of the « Headscarf » among French-Speaking Muslim Women

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Given the recurrence of debates in France regarding “the headscarf” and France’s secularizing laws, the topic of Islamic dress in France and francophone countries must be approached with care. This reflection discusses my design of a two-hour lesson on French “secularism” and “the headscarf” to include the voices of Muslim women. Availing multiple perspectives on a singular issue invites learners to see culture as dynamic rather than monolithic, an approach that I call a “diverse voices” approach to studying culture (Anderson, 2022). The lesson utilized a content-based approach, incorporating multiple modalities and tasks to maximize student engagement. The following day, I asked students to complete a 5-question survey to explore their perceptions of studying topics related to Islamic culture within francophone countries. Feedback was strongly positive; students appreciated the content-based approach and engagement strategy employed within the lesson. One student’s comments highlighted the presence of a test-centric “washback” effect, demonstrating that more explicit scaffolding was needed. This perspective suggests that students’ pedagogical goals and values may not perfectly align with the instructor’s. Inventorying students’ pre-extant assets and conducting a needs analysis of our students’ future work as warrior-linguists could better inform pedagogy. Insights from this successful lesson could be utilized to spark ideation or replication across the Institute when teaching sensitive cultural topics.

Keywords: Culture, francophone, French, Islam, Muslim, Secularism

INTRODUCTION

Linguistic competence is of little value if unaccompanied by relevant cultural competence. Pedagogies that develop students' cultural competencies must be careful to not reduce complex cultural phenomena to simplifications or generalizations that will be of limited applicability within our students' future roles. Cultural learning is exponentially complex for the DLIFLC's French learners given that learners' future work may span many French-speaking countries across multiple continents.

Analyzing the effectiveness of a recent lesson, this teacher reflection reviews a skills-integrated, multi-modal lesson on Muslim women's attire in French-speaking societies. The topic has proven to be a hot-button issue for French society in recent decades because of the complexities it presents to France's secular tradition. A 2010 law banned face coverings in public, including the *niqab* (the face covering worn by Muslim women); violators would be fined \$150. Neither French laws governing the wearing of the veil nor French secularism are above reproach: during the pandemic, France continued to enforce the law despite mandatory mask-wearing, which Amnesty International cited as transparently Islamophobic (Silverstein, 2020). What's more, only four of the 13 official public holidays in France are *not* religious (read: Catholic) in nature (Barleau & Nadeau, 2017).

The lesson familiarized students with France's laws before exposing them to varying viewpoints on Muslim women's attire from Muslim, French-speaking women themselves. In doing so, the lesson included a range of diverse opinions, thereby demonstrating the multidimensionality of complex social and cultural phenomena. This reflection includes some crucial background on the topic which informed the pedagogical choices made in designing this lesson. The reflection then outlines the lesson's tasks. Finally, students' feedback on the lesson is presented. Altogether, the lesson and approach seem promising for facilitating students' learning vis-à-vis complex cultural topics through authentic, diverse sources.

Background

In the final week of our 36-week program, I was scheduled to teach a two-hour lesson on "The Wearing of the (Islamic) Headscarf." Initially, the lesson focused exclusively on France. This section provides relevant background knowledge needed to understand the structure and conceptual framing of my redesign of the lesson.

Key Terms

To understand the sensitivities of this topic, some key terms must be defined. The definitions, provided here to facilitate the readers' understanding, are not necessarily identical to those within the studied texts. Moreover, concepts used within French and Francophone contexts may differ from their usage in other regions.

French “Secularism”

In France, secularism (French: “*laïcité*”) is an indispensable concept. Barlow and Nadeau (2017) defined *laïcité* as, “a government policy that excludes religion from anything related to state institutions” (p. 262). Secularism as practiced in France is viewed as the supportive tissue of the famed national motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood).

Headscarf

Recognizing a great variety of garments, styles, and traditions used by Muslim women worldwide, “headscarf” collectively refers to the *hijab*, *niqab*, *haik*, *chedor*, *abaya*, etc. France’s laws both define the headscarf and determine the spaces in which wearing a headscarf is legal. Again, such laws are specific to France.

F/francophone Countries

This term refers to countries where the French language was and/or is utilized, excluding France. The French do not consider themselves to be “francophone” (Barlow & Nadeau, 2017, p. 191), instead seeing the French language as a defining characteristic of French-ness (p. 158). Recently, 74 countries were counted among French-speaking nations, to varying degrees (Reynolds, 2024). Furthermore, “francophone” (uncapitalized “f”) differentiates French-speaking countries (e.g., Algeria) from member-states of the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (capitalized “F”), an international body comprised of both French-speaking and non-French-speaking countries (e.g., Egypt, Mexico).

THE INTERVENTION, IMPLEMENTED

I retained the first hour’s focus as proscribed, centered on a text explaining French laws regarding religious attire at work, in school, and public spaces. I modified the lesson for the second hour, with permission. As a non-Muslim, non-French national, I felt that I should not attempt to speak on behalf of these cultures. Instead, students should hear from Muslim women who chose to explain their views.

In the first hour, I introduced the topic through the following tasks.

1. Students (n=5) read aloud from PPT slides I had prepared that contained short definitions of French secularism followed by political cartoons satirizing pro- and con-positions on this issue. Satirical cartoons are an important tradition in French social discourse and offer glimpses into prevailing public sentiment on hot-button issues.
2. I then presented slides with internet headlines containing some key vocabulary I had previously screenshot. Students deduced their meaning. This approach draws from the incremental input-based approach to teaching vocabulary (Barcroft, 2012).

3. Students read the text, a summary of French laws (ILR Level 3; 507 words), framed within the following task: “An American Muslim soldier and family will be relocating to France. They want to respect local French laws, as the wife wears a headscarf. Create a graphic organizer of French laws to help her understand French laws.” I told students they would use these graphic organizers in the following hour.
4. Students read and, in small groups, drew their organizers on the board; then, after approximately 20 minutes, students explained them aloud as I corrected any ambiguities.

In the second hour, I led students to perform a skills-integrated, multi-modal lesson, using the following order:

1. Students guessed the number of Muslims worldwide and the number of Muslim-majority countries, then named francophone Muslim-Majority countries. I provided answers and then projected one image for each Muslim-majority francophone country. I assembled these images after Googling “women of Chad,” for example, and collecting the first image of women wearing a head/face covering that appeared (an ILR 0+ task).
2. Students orally compared the clothing styles they saw, quickly realizing the diversity of styles, colors, and shapes of the attire worn by women (an ILR 1 task).
3. Afterwards, each student was assigned to watch one video. I selected five 18–20 minute-long YouTube videos of Muslim women speaking in standard French about their clothing and their relationship to it. I had decided against cropping the videos given the personal nature of the anecdotes shared. Seeking a variety of views on Islamic dress, I included the videos of one woman who wore the *niqab*, one who wore Western clothing, one who converted to Islam, and two others who recently (re)started veiling.
 - a. Before watching, I used slides to teach students five common Islamic expressions in Arabic they would hear intermixed within the women’s French. The goal was to recognize the expression and have an awareness of its socio-cultural meaning.
 - b. For each video, I created a set of slides that contained four to six vocabulary items—presented using the aforementioned internet-headline deductive method—and five multiple-choice questions in English, with an answer key. Individually, students read these materials prior to watching.
 - c. Finally, students’ watching was oriented toward the assigned task: report to the class (your) specific woman’s name and identity, her relationship to Islamic attire, and where in France she could circulate without changing her attire (an ILR 2 task). This last task would require the graphic organizers created the previous hour. According to Bloom’s taxonomy, this task required learners to remember and understand (lower-order thinking skills) as well as analyze (a higher-order skill).

PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The lesson utilized content-based instruction (CBI), which posits that students, “learn a second language more successfully when they use the language as a means of understanding content, rather than as an end in itself” (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 118). I intended the lesson to be stimulating, recognizing that boredom, specifically within the foreign language classroom, is little understood but highly deactivating (Pawlak et al., 2020). The lesson reflected an approach that I had piloted when creating the “Diverse Arabic Voices Project” in 2022 as a university Arabic instructor (Anderson, 2022). The project aimed to develop students’ appreciation of the diversity of Arabic speakers. The project personalized broad social categories (“Muslim,” “Tunisian,” etc.) by exposing students to short, recorded interviews I had conducted with Arabic speakers who represented an array of nationalities, religions, gender, dialects, etc. Pedagogically, the project centered on the principle that no single person’s perspective can define a culture. Instead, multiple perspectives add depth and breadth to learners’ emergent understanding of culture.

FINDINGS

Student Feedback

I was curious to know: *How did students perceive this lesson about Islamic culture within the francophone countries?* To answer this question, I asked students to voluntarily complete an anonymous, 5-question survey to inform DLIFLC’s pedagogy. Four Likert-Scale questions (LSQ), (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) preceded a final question that asked for four written sentences. The morning after implementing this lesson, I sent the Microsoft Forms questions via Microsoft Teams to all students and asked them to direct-message me their responses. Four of five responded, while only three of four completed the final write-in question. Results of the LSQs are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Results of LSQ's (1-4 Only)

Question	Responses
1. After the lesson 7/30 on <i>laïcité</i> and Islamic dress in France, I have a better understanding of the topic.	strongly agree (3) agree (1)
2. After the lesson 7/30 on Muslim francophone women's relationship with veiling, I have a better understanding of the topic.	strongly agree (3) agree (1)
3. During that lesson, it was helpful to be exposed to 4-5 common Islamic expressions in Arabic.	strongly agree (2) neutral (1) agree (1)
4. The French language curriculum should include more cultural content on Islamic, francophone countries and societies.	strongly agree (1) agree (2) neutral (1)

Themes

Studying French Secularism and Muslim Women's Attire

Findings demonstrated that the lessons on French secularism and on Muslim women's attire were perceived to be beneficial to students' learning. One respondent wrote, "I found this lesson extremely useful. I had never studied Islam before this, so I was able to learn a lot." This quote demonstrates that the student perceived his cultural awareness was developing. What's more, these comments demonstrate that students may come to DLIFLC without any previous knowledge of Islam or knowing any Muslims. Instructors should therefore inventory the various assets and experiences students bring to the DLIFLC classroom, allowing instruction to be tailored to students' individual strengths and weaknesses. Such inventorying would help faculty to move beyond uninformed impressions of military students (Miller, 2016).

CBI, Anti-Boredom Approaches Beneficial

The quote above also suggests that learning through the CBI approach was successful. One student wrote: "The ability to each have something separate to talk about helped us not cover the same thing over and over." This suggests that these activities make each student responsible for providing classmates with unique (not duplicative), meaningful information and may promote engagement and prevent boredom within the language classroom. As an institution, DLIFLC requires that adult learners attend a daily minimum of six hours in the classroom. Conversely, faculty may not teach six consecutive hours, nor may ever have experienced a daily routine of six consecutive hours of second language learning and the cognitive load that it requires. As such, instructors must be aware of the levels of social-emotional stimulation that lessons afford learners, both within their teaching hours and across the learners' entire day.

A Testing-Centric “Washback” Effect

Less pedagogically desirable, the short survey uncovered signs of a serious misalignment between one student and curricular objectives. One student wrote: “The overall topic was useful, though I’m not sure it’s quite required to understand French culture quite yet. Although, there’s a chance it will appear on the DLPT.” This student also responded “neutral” to questions on the benefit of studying Islamic culture within francophone countries. These views support his perception that a lesson’s utility ultimately depends upon its inclusion within final assessments, not within his career as a warrior-linguist. This view denotes a form of washback, meaning the influence of an assessment on the learning and teaching that the assessment intends to assess (Green, 2012). As research has noted, washback may be influenced by other factors and stakeholders (Rahman et al., 2023). For example, his affinities to France may have narrowed his focus to France. This student was fortunate to participate in a month-long immersion in France, and at the time of this writing, did not yet have plans or orders that would deploy him abroad. Further follow-up with this student could have identified his perceived future needs for the French language and French/francophone cultural knowledge, uncovering his imagined identities—imagined not meaning unreal, but rather how he envisions his future relationship to France and French/francophone culture (Norton & Pavlenko, 2007).

Notwithstanding, this student’s perspectives demonstrate the need for additional scaffolding within the lesson on Islamic attire in France when implemented in the future. Scaffolding must emphasize the size (Pew Research Center, 2017) and the importance of the Muslim population in France (Aziz, 2022). Regarding test washback, it is instructors who are best positioned to articulate to students the goals of testing, what testing seeks to measure, and the relationship between testing and curriculum (Rahman et al., 2023). To this end, instructors themselves must be equipped with a clear understanding of these issues.

The foci of this lesson, as with curriculum development in general, should be based on a needs analysis. According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), this analysis consists of:

the use of observation, surveys, interviews, situation analysis, analysis of language samples collected in different settings—in order to determine the kinds of communication learners would need to master if they were in specific occupational or educational roles and the language features of particular settings. (p. 95)

For DLIFLC’s French program, this would include an understanding of the conditions (geographies, dialects) in which students will work and live, and the linguistic tools (vocabularies, registers, rhetoric) they will need to be effective within those settings. Serving all branches of the military and given the security-sensitive nature of their work, it may not be feasible to implement such a needs analysis. Recently, one such analysis was conducted by a British government agency, which may offer insights into replication within DLIFLC’s context (Davie, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This two-hour lesson aimed to expand students' understanding of French secularism and Muslim culture within France and francophone countries. Through a CBI, multi-modal lesson that incorporated multiple skills, students utilized French as a tool to explore culture. Rather than static, monolithic depictions of culture, multiple perspectives on socially sensitive topics were made available to students. Feedback from students was positive. What appeared most challenging was not social sensitivities, but rather orienting students' understanding of the importance of this content toward their careers, beyond the DLTP. For this reason, explicit scaffolding will be needed in future iterations. Conversations with military linguists, both for faculty and for students, may better inform both about the cultural knowledge and skills DLIFLC students will need when they deploy. Feedback also demonstrated that the CBI, engagement-inducing lesson design was appreciated. These insights can spark ideation across the institute when teaching and designing lessons on complex cultural topics.

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