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Studying Arabic in Oman

オマーンでアラビア語を勉強する

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Abstract

This is a reflection and field trip report about the scene of teaching and learning Arabic as a foreign language in Oman, as part of a project to write about the same topic in different Arabic speaking countries, hoping It may be useful for foreign learners of Arabic. The visit was between 19th to 25th of February 2018 and financed by the research money allocated by Osaka University to the writer.

The traditional places to study Arabic as a foreign language were usually -related with Cairo-Egypt, Damascus- Syria, Amman-Jordan, and Tunis- Tunisia. Oman is joining the race to attract learners for two reasons+ the possibility to learn the dialect of a Gulf country; and after the Arab spring it became difficult to visit some countries for safety reasons.

Keywords: Arabic, Oman. Teaching Arabic. Language education

1. Introduction:

Oman is an Arab country with a long history. The older name of Oman is Magan. It is located in the far southwest of the Asian continent, where it covers 309,000km in the southeast part of the Arab peninsula. Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and the Arab sea are bordering Oman from the east while the neighboring countries Saudi Arabia, Emirates as well as Yemen are the three countries that take the western borders of a man. Because of the location of Oman, it was known for its marine activities as well many people were able to guide the ships traveling in the Indian Ocean from the western part of Asia and connecting them to the African continent. It is said that one Arab sailor helped Vasco Da Gama to discover a new way to reach that eastern Indian islands. Although Oman played an important role in connecting with India Persia and the eastern coast of Africa, and was an important hub for long time where many foreigners visited, but Oman was able to keep its own language because of its isolated nature as sea surrounds it from eastern and southern parts while western and northern parts are surrounded by desert and mountains.

Oman has natural resources especially oil and it is known that these natural resources are the main sources of income for the country. Even though, Oman is not totally dependent on the natural

resources as there are other activities taking place in the country, some of them are to benefit from its location while other activities are well planned to take Oman from a country dependent on natural resources to activities promoting the country and building modern economic system with a partnership between government and private sector. According to the strategic plan and vision of Oman 2020, it is targeted to achieve an increase in the human workforce for different sectors especially in educational and cultural activities. The country adopts a foreign policy that keeps good relations with all neighboring countries and even with the whole world with strong relations with the countries that have long history links with it or share borders with the country.

It is also known that for long years Oman lived in isolation from the outside world. But since 1970, started a new policy of openness and built good relations with the world and opened bit by bit to allow more growth and strong relations. Oman also is a member of the six gulf countries constituting together the Gulf cooperation council with Saudi Arabia Kuwait, Emirates Qatar, and Bahrain.

The nature of a man is divided between the coastal area with an open landscape of desert and inner areas which are higher with so many mountains that one of them Mount Shams or the sun mountain reaches the level of more than 9000 feet. And the population of Oman are working in the fishing activities and some minimal agricultural activities because of the lack of natural surface water in the form of rivers they depend basically on water which they can reserve from the few rains, but so many places are complaining of high drought. Its population exceeds 4 million inhabitants and at least 50% of them are Omanis while others are migrants for economic reasons to work there. So according to the official statistics foreigners come from different countries; basically Indian Pakistani, Bengalis some are Arabs or Europeans with a remarkable increase of the Chinese population in Oman. So in Oman now one can witness a remarkable open market as well as a small percentage of the economy depends on tourism.

Opposite to other Gulf countries, Oman depends more on its own people as workforce. So you can find Omanis serving in different sectors of the economic scene. So, the visitor to Oman can see its working in as taxi drivers, shopkeepers, public servants, as well as many other jobs. This means; Arabic is commonly used in daily life in Oman.

The population of Oman tends to accept different job opportunities. They do not seek high rank jobs as is the case in many other Gulf countries, but they accept any type of job that is available and that they can serve in. In this case, they may get jobs with a salary that is around US\$1500, which could be a driver in an oil company, army soldier, or policeman. These jobs are considered low salary jobs. In Oman, the average salary should be around 600 Omani Ryal which is about \$2000, and any job that is less than 600 Per month it is permitted for this person to seek extra work during his free time. That's why many of them are working as taxi drivers or they accept other small jobs which have

direct communication with the public. That's why it is considered a great opportunity to visit Oman to have a strong chance to communicate directly with the people who are native speakers of Arabic.

2. Language in Oman:

Oman speaks Arabic language and the dialects there are the dialects of the Arab peninsula. This means they share a lot of points with other gulf dialects of Arabic. Of course there is remarkable presence of Persian Hindi and other languages in Oman, but one can easily notice that Arabic is so much used in the streets. There is an extra feature in the language in Oman which is that "g" sound is pronounced different from the other Arab countries it is also pronounced in both Yemen and Egypt as G not J. the Arabic spoken in Oman also has a great influence of southern Arabic languages which are used in the isolated areas and in the mountains and they call this language GABBALI. These southern Arabic languages are also Semitic languages but they have remarkable differences with Arabic in both standard dialect forms.

3. Some characteristics of the society in Oman:

In Oman, there are three Muslim sects living together: Sunni, Shi'i, and Ibaddhi. The last one is very historical group that exists nowadays only in Oman and Algeria. They live together side-by-side in one society in a great example of tolerance in the Muslim world. Related to this, there is another important characteristic of the society which is safety. It is very safe to live and move in Oman. You can feel this from the first visit and while walking in the streets freely without any feeling of being annoyed or disturbed. As a personal note, I saw one Japanese young woman after living there for few months she was ready to travel alone at night with a taxi driver from one city to another without being afraid and she didn't even hesitate to do so. Meeting with several foreigners living there for long time, no one mentioned any problem in living and moving freely in the country despite the long distances and the few population and the possibility of covering long distance with strangers in small cars.

Honesty is another characteristic that the visitor can feel. People do not complain of losing their personal belongings even if they left them unobserved. As a personal experience, I had to leave my personal mobile on a table in the lobby of the hotel in the capital city to recharge. I left it there on the table for more than 15 minutes and when I came back it was as I left it.

Oman is applying several measures to achieve modernization and offering most of the services according to international standards. So, the services of communication and information are available on a large scale as well as the touristic services. It is also easy to find banking services and money exchange services in most of the places with a nice and welcoming smile. Hospitality is one of the general characteristics of Arabs in common and it is highly present in Oman. From the airport to

transportation to all services that one can need during his stay there will be done with a nice smile from the bottom of the heart of every one Who is doing it. People are happy to serve foreigners and deal with them and to offer them what they can as much as they can and they also do not cause any source of annoying to the foreigner. This is one of the characteristics that cannot be found in many other cities in the Arab world.

One of the difficulties that many face the newcomer in general, is the lack of public transportation. There is a new network of buses established by the government but it still in the growing process it needs more time to reach more places and serve more people. This network is available basically in the capital city of Muscat but going to other cities or remote areas one must use Taxi as the only possible way to move. And here comes the second difficulty which is the absence of taxi fare meters. Because of this absence, many taxi drivers try to claim more money and foreigners find themselves obliged either to pay more or to have previous knowledge about how much they should pay.

4. Arabic as a foreign language in Oman:

As we mentioned before, there is a remarkable percentage of the population belonging to different language backgrounds they came basically for work and in very little occasions for other purposes such as tourism or study. So, a big number of residents in Oman need to know some Arabic for communication in their daily life. Very few of them go to learn Arabic as a second language through regular courses. But there is an increasing number of foreigners who are interested to study Arabic while being in Oman for work. And there is an increasing number now heading to Oman basically to learn Arabic.

Teaching Arabic as a foreign language started to be a regular activity almost 10 years ago. A number of foreign learners of Arabic decided to go to study in Oman as they may find a better chance to learn and practice standard Arabic mixed with the dialect of a gulf country, that is because many other countries in the area have language centers or programs at schools and universities but Arabic is not so much used in the daily life. A short visit to any airport in the Gulf area Will prove that most of the employees at the airports and those who do the services are not Arabic speakers and have no Arabic background almost at all. Opposite to that, there is a clear chance to practice Arabic in Oman. Other numbers of learners go to Oman because of its safety condition and quiet and calm atmosphere. Since the Arabic spring in 2011, many European and American universities stopped sending their students to study abroad in many Arab countries for safety reasons. But when it took longer than expected, they decided to find another place to send their students and they found Oman.

There are several institutions offering Arabic courses for foreigners in the country. They can be divided to a group of universities having Arabic as a foreign language for university learners. Other

language centers that offer different languages for their learners and among them Arabic and the third the group is Arabic language centers that are already established only teach Arabic. Language centers are following strict rules of quality assurance and they receive their permission and license for work basically from the Ministry of labor and employment as training centers. Some universities teach Arabic as a foreign language and they special language unit affiliated to the University.

I conducted a visit to Oman in February 2018 trying to see and interview teams working in language centers and language institutes in different universities. The outcome of the visit can be mentioned in the following remarks:

Some universities in Oman have established units to teach Arabic as a foreign language such as Nizwa University, Suhar University, and Dhufat University. The Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat yet is planning to start a language program for Arabic but its form is not yours yet declared. Nizwa University has started a program in a language Center for teaching Arabic as a foreign language and they call this unit DHADD Institute. There are very few students enrolled in this unit. Most of the enrolled students in these different universities are coming from Chinese universities.

The royal palace has also established a language unit for teaching Arabic which is called Sultan Qaboos college for teaching Arabic as a foreign language, and it is located about 160 km outside of the capital city in a city called Manah. This college offers courses for international students with full board accommodation and with very low fees to support and encourage learners to join the program. It offers short term study for eight weeks or long-term study for 16 weeks. The language programs follow that European framework of reference with high awareness of its elements although they don't have a clear solution of the diglossia in Arabic. This college can except 30 to 40 students each term.

There are several private language centers that offer Arabic as a foreign language and they are distributed in different cities of Oman. There are some centers in the capital city of Muscat, while there is a language center called Noor Magan located in the city of Ibri which is 240 km outside of Muscat. This language center has also started operating small unit in the capital city or year ago. While the one in Ibri is receiving university students, the new unit in the capital city offers its services to diplomats, company employees and military members who are seeking to learn Arabic while doing and continuing their work in Muscat. Noor Magan is following the ACTGL guidelines. The owner of a tourism company noticed the increasing demand on studying Arabic in Oman, so he established a language center for teaching Arabic which is called the Arab Experience center. This center offers one of the most well prepared long-term programs for study which is planned according to academic semesters and it is consisting of four academic semesters, each of them is 18 week. This program adopts the ACTFL guidelines and it takes into consideration the diglossic case of Arabic. So, the center offers written skills in standard Arabic and the oral skills in colloquial Arabic of Oman.

5. Guidelines:

Universities tend to follow their standards and guidelines in teaching Arabic as a foreign language, while language centers and The Sultan Qaboos college follow the International guidelines. The college was the only one to adopt the Common European Framework of reference {CEF}. Other language centers and even language units in universities follow the ACTFL guidelines. Of course, awareness of the guidelines and The ability to follow them differs from one center to another. In Nizwa University, they claim they follow the American guidelines. While in the interview with the director, it became clear that they know very little about it and they miss understand or miss interpret it. The academic staff of Noor Magan center in the city of Ibri showed high understanding and they made their own interpretation and they decided to focus basically on standard Arabic. This means they decided to avoid teaching the dialect. The Arab experience center is adopting the American guidelines with high awareness and they integrate the standard and the colloquial together in one program.

6. Extracurricular activities:

Most of these language units decided to offer some extra activities like cultural trips, cultural lectures, and they also establish some kind of partnership and try to build connections between learners and the community around them. So, they invite volunteers or other teachers or sometimes teaching trainees to meet with the learners and conduct exchanging language meetings between both of them. Some programs call this *language partner*, while others mention it under that title *language assistant* without a clear difference between the two titles. They also try to build more relations by adopting *host family* programs although it would be difficult to send male Learners of Arabic to stay with families as many families would refuse to have a strange man in the family while there are women and this maybe traditionally refused.

7. The offered courses:

Some of the language centers and language units in universities offer courses for standard Arabic while it is very rare to have combined courses for both standard and colloquial. There are no courses devoted to teaching colloquial alone. The duration of the courses in private language centers is usually one month with one exception in the Arabic Experience center where the offered courses per semesters which are 4 months for each course. The duration of the course The Sultan Qaboos college for teaching Arabic as a foreign language is eight weeks, and the maximum for the student to study there is two terms which mean 16 weeks at most. And after his study in this college, the student is supposed to leave the country back to his home country.

Most of the language centers working in Oman offer courses in the package which includes study and housing. Some of them even include food. They also offer pick up and drop off services between the international airport and the housing affiliated with the language center. It is exceptional to find a course offered that comes without a package of accommodation. This can be found basically with The Arab Experience center and the Muscat branch of Noor Magan center.

8. Final remarks:

Living expenses in Oman would be relatively high compared to the other countries of the Arab world. Still, Oman could be a wonderful destination for studying Arabic as foreign language. The strong points that support studying it in Oman are safety, peaceful nature of the country and the people, honesty, the welcoming atmosphere and the efforts exerted to have and to respect high standards in language education. The weak points could be related to the high cost of living, the difficulties of finding public transportation and the hot weather. It is important to keep in mind that studying Arabic in Oman gives a great chance to be exposed to a dialect from the Gulf area, with a higher chance to practice the language in authentic context with native speakers in daily life situations.