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Studying Arabic in Jordan

ヨルダンでアラビア語を勉強

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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 Jordan, 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 25th of February to first of march 2019 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. Many countries went out of competition after the Arab spring for security reasons. Still, Jordan keeps its position and may have gained more importance for reasons to be addressed in this article.

Keywords: Arabic, Jordan, Teaching Arabic, Language education

1. Introduction

Jordan is an Arab country with history that goes back to thousands of years. It is located in the far southwest of the Asian continent, where it occupies a small landscape of about 89,342 square kilometers. It lies in the crossroads between the Levant, Iraq and the Arab peninsula. Jordan is a kingdom officially known as The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The royal family - Descendants of Prophet Muhammad- took the power of the area located to the east of the Jordan River in 1946. It is a constitutional monarchy with wide legislative and executive role for the king. Jordan is a member of the united nations as well as the Arab League and the Islamic co-operation organization.

Many dynasties and civilization have shred in the history of Jordan. Evidences and monuments are still present to prove the role of Nabataeans, Ancient Egyptians, Romans, Arabs, medieval Europeans, Ottomans and British in the history of the area. The antiquities of these include the Roman theatre in Jerash, petra and Many castles and forts that were built across the centuries and became attractive sites for tourism.

The location of Jordan puts it on the core of the crossroads between many regions and civilization of the old world as well as the new one. It lies in the south west of Asia and surrounded

by many countries where Arabic is massively used with variety of dialects. It shares borders with Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Saudi Arabia with a small share on the Red Sea.

This unique location plus the relatively stable and safe condition of Jordan made it a suitable refuge for thousands of Arabs escaping from different types of bloody wars and conflicts of the region. It started accepting refugees since 1948 war when thousands of Palestinians crossed the river seeking shelter from the massacres in their home country. This was repeated again and again with Iraqis and Syrians during the last two decades.

Jordan continues to receive refugees although it suffers a huge deficit in its economy and natural resources. That is why it receives financial aid and support from different countries and international organizations. Its economy depends on few sectors with a remarkable part of foreign investment to make a good use of its human resources which could be considered as its highest source of economy. The World bank classifies Jordan as an Upper middle income country which puts more pressure on the new generations with less offered work opportunities. This has led to work migration to the surrounding rich Gulf Countries for decades as well as Iraq until the 1990s. This helped filling the gap of work possibilities and enriched the ability to acquire and understand dialects of Gulf countries and the Iraqi ones.

It seems that Jordan is a safe country with no enmity against foreigners in general. And it is also a good place for women as verbal and physical harassment is not part of the daily scene. I was told by one of Osaka University female student that she visited several Arab countries and she finds Jordan the safest place for women. Also, one of the directors of a language center in Amman told me that police invested money to monitor streets to stop all kinds of harassment and abuse against women.

The concern occurs when there is a political tension related to Palestine or when Economic pressure increases and people start to demonstrate against the frequently increasing taxes and services fees. Even during these tensions, security concerns are limited to demonstration areas.

2. Language in Jordan

Jordan speaks Arabic language and the dialects there are the dialects of the Levantine. However, there are some varieties because of neighboring different countries and some of them are Bedouins with Gulf dialects. Standard Arabic is the official language of the kingdom and is used in education and official contexts as well as in the news. But the everyday language is the Jordanian dialect which is classified under the Levant group of dialects.

The dialects of Jordan are also influenced by the Gulf dialects as a result of the Jordanian population working in Gulf countries. They come back every summer with a notable load of the

local dialects where they live. Other Arabic speaking refugees leave some prints of their original dialects when they live in Jordan. We also can not ignore the possible Egyptian dialects influence because of the mass media.

3. Some characteristics of the society in Jordan

The massive majority of Jordanians Are Arabs with about 2% of non-Arab minority. And about 95% Are Sunni Muslims. Some small number are Shiites and Ahmadi Muslims. There is also Christian minority of about 2%. This number looks so small when we know that Christianity in Jordan goes back to the first century AD. These religious minorities are Jordanians and other refugees coming from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine.

More than 80% of the population are urban while there is a remarkable percentage of Bedouin groups. Despite this fact, we can say that Jordan is a tribal society. This raises expectations about the nature of social and economic relations there. Still, it is not difficult for foreigners to find good chances for living and housing in the country.

Education is one of sources of pride where the number of highly educated population puts Jordan in high rank among its neighbors. Many graduates of the old generations studied abroad while the new generations enjoy the spread of public and private universities in the kingdom. This high level of education does not assure high quality work with good income. Thus, graduates could end up working in small businesses or driving taxis. If they do not wish to do so, then they may travel to work in the rich neighboring Gulf countries.

Foreign languages are taught in Jordan, especially English. They may be used in some business contexts, but Arabic is almost the only spoken language in everyday life and on the streets. Foreigners can get some help from those who can speak foreign languages but they are exposed basically to Arabic.

4. Arabic as a foreign language in Jordan

As we mentioned before, there is little percentage of the population belonging to different language backgrounds who came basically for work and in limited occasions for other purposes such as tourism. Hence, many residents in Jordan need to grasp some Arabic for communication in their daily life. Few of them learn Arabic as a second language through regular courses. But there is an increasing number of foreigners who are interested in studying Arabic while being in the kingdom for work or training.

There is an increasing number now heading to Jordan basically to learn Arabic. Jordan became a major hub for foreigners wishing to learn Arabic. Before the Arab spring, Cairo, Tunis

and Damascus. Amman – and other cities of the kingdom – got a better position with its relatively stable condition and having an accent and dialect from the Levantine group. This position was not a sudden change. There were some language centers around the new millennium. In addition, the national university started a graduate program for teaching Arabic for foreigners.

This new space in the TAFL market encouraged some foreign organizations and investors to go and find their opportunity. Some foreign Universities like Middle Berry started a joint program with the University of Jordan. The same university started an independent program for foreigners attracting many of them within the language center of the University. Although it is a bit difficult to contact the admin team of the center from abroad, however, many foreign students know how to get there and register themselves.

There are several institutions offering Arabic courses for foreigners in the country. They can be divided into 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 group is Arabic language centers that are already established only to teach Arabic. Language centers receive their permission and license for work basically from the Ministry of Education. Some universities teach Arabic as a foreign language and they special language unit affiliated to the University.

I conducted a visit to Amman-Jordan in February 2019 trying to see and interview teams working in language centers and language institutes in different universities. The outcome of the visit highlighted the following remarks:

Many universities started independent programs or joint ones to teach Arabic as a foreign language and they have learners coming for a semester or for a whole academic year program. Other Language centers are offering their programs through the year, while many others can find their chance in special seasons like the end of year courses or summer courses.

A small number of learners are residents in Jordan while many of them are going to Jordan only to study Arabic. Those learners can be University students and graduate students in fields like Arabic, Middle eastern studies, Political science, Islamic studies ... etc. some learners are trainees who study Arabic as part of their job training. In this category, we find diplomats, journalists and military staff.

Learners can find places for living among the different parts of the cities without restrictions, especially in the Capital city of Amman. They can easily find places according to their wish or budget, or get some help from the private language centers where they study.

The open market of Jordan gave a big chance for foreigners to establish their own language center. That is how some professors or graduates of American universities decided to establish

language centers like Qasid or Sijal, or go for partnership like Wafid.

Some language centers focus only on teaching Arabic like Qasid, Sejal and Wafid. Some other centers are teaching Arabic among other languages, basically English, like Ali Baba which is owned by an Osaka University ph.d graduate in engineering. Modern Languages Center is the oldest center which was established in 1970 to teach English but it teaches many languages now with residential facility and special rooms to conduct certified international language proficiency tests.

Centers vary in their size; so you can find small size centers like Sejal and much bigger ones like the language center of the University of Jordan. Still, the small ones are having agreements with other organizations to use more classes during summer vacation or are expanding by hiring wider places with more teaching/learning space.

Shari' Al-Jami'a or the university st. which is officially called Queen Rania st. is hosting many language centers as it is in the heart of the city. But the Modern Language Center is located in a quiet different area: Jabal Elweibdeh, and Sijal is in the touristic area of Amman.

Learners of these centers are basically university students and graduate students in many foreign countries, while some of them are residents who are spending some time in Jordan for work reasons or family ones. The Language Center of Jordan university receives a big number of individuals coming on their own to find a good chance and experience in learning, they are attracted by the name of the biggest national university. Qasid receives some individuals but also more and more contracts with universities and other organizations from Europe and North America. Wafid is a new center trying to find its way by establishing some partnerships with specialized educational institutes in Europe which means they have more students in two occasions: end of year and summer. Sijal is similar to Wafid with more concentration on American Universities.

Although summer is relatively hot, but it is the high season for studying Arabic in Jordan as the main stream of learners is university students. This is also helpful for the small centers to benefit from the university vacation and get some help from the part time teachers working with the Universities.

Many language centers go abroad to market themselves during international language conferences and teaching workshops and exhibitions. They are also building connections and seeking publicity through internet and immediate response to their customers thorough e-mail or whats app. This is not the case with the university center as I tried to reach them before visiting Amman but it was not possible.

The Modern Language Center has readiness to welcome big groups as they have well designed and well equipped three floor building with many classrooms that are available all morning and early afternoon for Arabic classes. This gives them more flexibility in accepting special groups with

big numbers any time of the year. So, they can find their own way with other markets like East Asia which have different calendar.

Some language units depend on foreigners in the adamin teams. Qasid has many non-native members who studied Arabic long time ago and then they liked to stay in Jordan and work there. The general manager and the academic programs director are just examples. The managing director in Sijal is also an American yong lady who studied Arabic in the United States and in Jordan, then she liked to stay in the country. They have high proficiency levels and good ability to adapt in Jordan. They can also be good examples to the foreigners coming to study there.

5. Guidelines

Awareness of language learning guidelines seems important topic with the educational staff in many language centers in Jordan. There is good knowledge of both American and European guidelines. Still, teachers are not always on the same level, and some times they are not able to address the special nature of the Arabic Language. Some others are thinking that these guidelines are not applicable to Arabic because of its diglossic nature.

High awareness of the guidelines and the need for adapting them to Arabic was part of a nice conversation with Dr Aref Nour in Wafid institute. A tough conversation was there during the discussion with Dr. Khaled Abu Amsha in Qasid. It is important to state that the name of Dr. Abu Amsha is a strong element in the Qasid's Success. This agreement was only about the possibility to find authentic material in teaching MSA in the elementary levels.

The official documents of the Language Center of the University of Jordan show alignment with the Common European Framework -CEF- while the textbook and classification of levels do not seem to be on the same level. They use their own teaching textbooks which seem to be very traditional and dated in their methods and organization.

The Modern Language Center also adopts the CEF for teaching their courses in different languages, but there is no special mention to Arabic in their papers.

Housing is usually a personal choice of the learners, and they can decide where to live and with whom. It is all their choice and according to their wish and budget. This is for regular learners, but for summer or winter programs' learners, housing can be part of the trip package.

6. Extracurricular activities

Most of these language units decided to offer some extra activities like cultural trips, cultural lectures. Some centers arrange the trips and include them in the program, while others coordinate between their learners and some tour companies. They guide or encourage their learners to visit the

cultural and historical attractions in the country. They also try to build more relations by adopting *host family* programs. The most important part, which is direct communication with native speakers, is actually not arranged by the language units as it is easy to establish direct connection with the welcoming and friendly population of the kingdom.

7. The offered courses

Levels of the learners are not well described except in very few cases. Classifying students in matching groups is more important. It is up to the group to decide the level and language material than to find clear distinguishing placement test that tells the exact level of the learner.

Regular courses can go on monthly basis or as semesters, while customized courses go according to the wish of the learners and their availability of time. The week plan usually covers five days for the full time study, and it is about 16 to twenty hours per week. In most of the cases, they start about 9 or 10 am. It is very rare to find courses arranged for evening. There may be one exception which is the courses of the French Cultural Center in Amman which offers evening classes for 2 or 3 days a week.

The offered courses are basically concentrating on MSA. Few regular courses combine the dialect with the MSA. Special courses for the dialect are rarely offered. The language center of the University of Jordan devotes only two hours out of twenty to the dialect. Qasid gives some evening classes for the dialect as elective. Wafid and The Modern Language Center are offering customized courses upon the request of their groups.

It is more common to find the language centers offering courses and leaving the housing and food choices to the learners in regular courses. They may advice or recommend places or rental companies, but they usually do not interfere directly in the matter, except when they offer “home stay” services. But, when it comes to the short term study and summer courses, many language centers offer a package that includes study, housing, and trips. The Modern Language Center is the only place that prefers to include housing in the service.

8. Final remarks

Jordan is a good experience for language learners in general. Its location, population, safety, experience in teachingetc are strong points. It has a big number of language centers. Still, this market is not organized and it depends on the individual to find his way. The ability to cover the gap between theory and practice in methodology needs more work. Although taxi drivers - like in many other middle eastern cities - tend to cheat by charging higher for foreigners, and although public transportation is not efficient in the country so far, but this problem can be solved by using

company-based taxi service like Uber and Careem.

Qasid is well organized and they have clear information to offer the learner, yet, they still have some little points to be addressed about their point of view and their offered dialect classes, but they are offering quality education. They have their self-developed material for teaching which is not for sale outside the center. Wafid is relatively new, small in size, but they are growing and willing to achieve high standard education. They are also the fastest center to respond and they have friendly team in administration ready to help everyone. They use a new textbook which seems with less gaps between its different parts. The same textbook is used in other centers like Ali Baba which is the only center accredited from a foreign organization – in London. Ali Baba has a good location right in front of the University of Jordan. Their classes are well designed and equipped. Their weak point is the lack of experience among their coordination and teaching staff at the time of my visit. Sijal also has the same problem, but they get some help during summer from more experienced teachers as I mentioned before. Sijal also has an artistic and orientalist taste. This can be clear in their location and decoration. The modern language Center has strong points in its premises and so much enthusiasm in its admin team. They gain experience in many things and open to learn more. Still, they need to work more on their over-all planning of the curriculum. Their history and experience in teaching other languages and running international exams can help them easily and shortly.

Sometimes, results and outcomes of the education are far more than expectations. This is the case of the learners in the language center of the University of Jordan. The papers are written in accordance with the CEF, while the educational material and teaching methods are very traditional. By the end of the study period, learners are achieving a higher level of proficiency that does not agree with the level of teaching. They are also better compared to their mates in other language centers. The only interpretation for this phenomenon is: learners in big national universities have a big chance to be in contact with many native speakers in the same age and they both share similar interests. This is just a hypothesis that needs research and data collection from different countries.