

บทความแลกเปลี่ยนประสบการณ์เล่าสู่กันฟัง

Teaching English in Saudi Arabia

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The Technical Institute of Naval Studies in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia was meant to be, first and foremost, a technical training center. It was to be a place where young Saudi naval cadets could receive the training they needed to perform their duties as full-fledged naval personnel. This included, for instance, training in electronics, mechanics, seamanship, or clerical skills. But since their teachers for these technical courses were all expatriates, and since these courses were taught in English, the students needed a solid foundation in English before they could begin any of the technical training.

Although some of the students had studied English in primary or secondary school (very few of the entering cadets had completed secondary school) most of them came to the classroom at "zero-level" English. We were expected to have them at an advanced level (able to understand lectures on how to maintain diesel engines, for instance) in a mere fifty weeks! Several instructors thought this was impossible, and simply did the best we could.

We were given only one week to teach the alphabet. This was to a group of students whose first language not only had completely different letter shapes but also was written from right to left! Those who had trouble learning the letters were left behind almost from day one. There neither the time nor the teachers to schedule remedial classes for these unfortunates, though given the chance they probably would have done fine. There were students who completed the English language training program and still did not know the differences between

the letters "u" and "w", "g" and "j", and "b" and "p" The powers-that-be, however, did not consider this a major problem since there was little emphasis on writing except for occasional rote copying.

Compounding the linguistic difficulties were the cultural problems. Saudi Arabia has come into a great deal of wealth in the past fifteen years, and though the government is trying to disperse that wealth to all segments of society, it hasn't as of yet been totally successful. Many of the students I taught, for instance, were from farming families whose lives were probably not that much different from their ancestors of a thousand years ago. Some students were from Beduin backgrounds, the nomadic tribes who had been crisscrossing the desert since before the birth of Christ. As I was told by one colleague, "If you think it's culture shock for you, think what it's like for them!" Many of them would never voluntarily sit in a chair, for instance, they would feel much more comfortable sitting on the floor. Many had never worn shirts, pants or shoes before. They were used to the traditional Arab "thobe" (long, white gown) and sandals or bare feet. Many had probably never seen a foreigner before and in fact had been taught since very young to treat all infidels (non-Muslims) with suspicion. Now, in the Navy, they were bound up in tight-fitting trousers and shirts and heavy boots, made to sit on hard wooden chairs for five hours and take orders from foreigners.

The materials we used didn't do much to help the motivation of the students. The text-

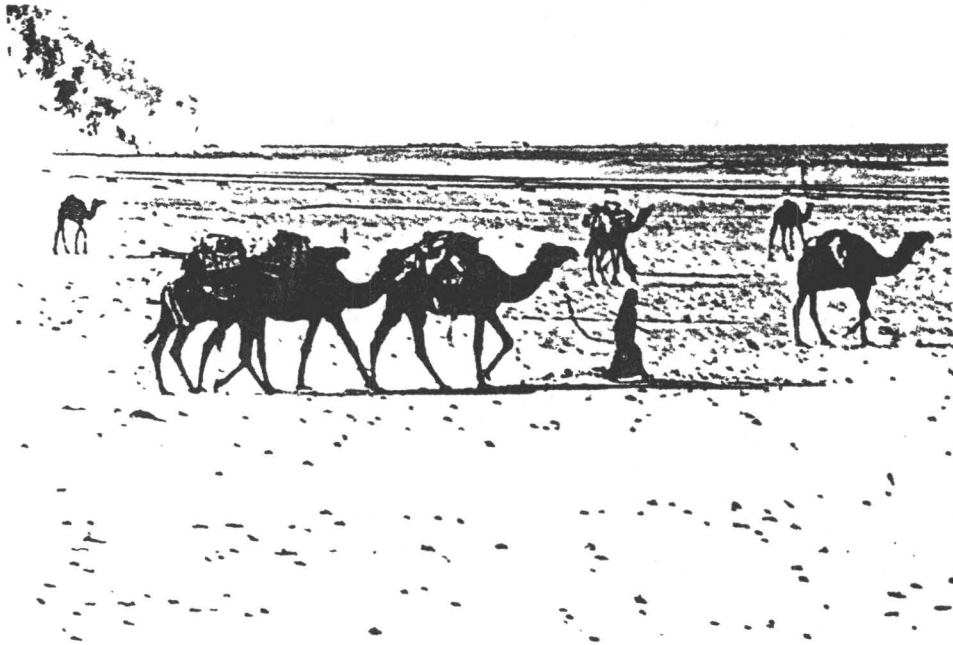
books were solidly based in the forties, with "grammar boxes", dialogues, and lots of mechanical written exercises in which the students had to, for instance, change present tense verbs to past tense. There was little attempt to teach English as a communicative instrument, either in speaking or writing. But this was hardly surprising since we had so little time and had to raise the students recognition level of a large number of technical and sub-technical words (such as "hammer" "mine sweeper", "rotate", "combustion", etc.), very quickly. The classes turned into little more than vocabulary and grammar exercise forums. In other words, they turned into preparation sessions for the exams which were given every twenty-five units.

The textbook materials also fell under the heavy cultural constraints of Saudi Arabia. There was never any mention of women. (Women in Saudi Arabia are basically kept at home. They are not allowed to drive, usually wear the all-concealing black "chadors" when they go out, and are strictly forbidden to have social contacts with anybody outside their immediate family.) Believe it or not, the students finished their fifty weeks of language training without ever being introduced to any of the English feminine pronouns. It was as if "she", "her" and "hers" were dirty words that had no place in a civilized language classroom.

However, this all changed during my last year there. There were so many complaints from the upper level technical instructors about the students abysmal English that the Navy was forced finally to implement a new curriculum. The new books were much more communicative oriented (they even included the feminine forms) had better exercises, better illustrations and the technical vocabulary was postponed until the students had the basics under control. At least that was the theory. Unfortunately, by then the program had begun to breakdown in other ways. Salaries for instructors were reduced considerably, which prompted a lot of expatriates to resign. The navy then decided that this gave them a golden opportunity to reduce expenses. Instead of replacing the teachers who left, they simply expanded the classroom size. So whereas there

originally was an excellent student-teacher ratio of about 12 to 1, it suddenly shot up to around 20 to 1! (That probably doesn't sound too bad to anyone who teaches at the university level in Thailand, but it must be remembered that the disciplinary problems in Saudi were much worse. Also, imagine teaching the abc's to a group of twenty students, not one of whom understands even simple instructions.) It began to seem that the Saudi authorities cared little about the quality of the program but were only looking for ways to save money. The attitude of the teachers became increasingly recalcitrant. A siege mentality developed: us against them, hardly conducive to learning. Finally, in July 1988, I and many other teachers left when the naval authorities would renew our contracts only after making drastic cuts in salary and benefits.

But despite the drawbacks of the program, there were many students I liked. The fact that they could even survive those conditions was something to be admired. Outside of the classroom they were more or less physically tortured. They were forced to run laps around the parade ground for hours, often in summer temperatures exceeding forty degrees. They were often awakened in the middle of the night by the "upper classmen" and made to stand rigid for hours, or made to sleep while wearing their uniforms and boots. You can imagine the deleterious effect it had in the classroom. One of our major chores was to keep the students from falling asleep. We were warned many times that if an officer walked into one of our classrooms and found a sleeping student, we would be fired immediately and put on the next flight to the States. (It was rumoured that once the base commander stepped into an English and found the instructor asleep, but that was never verified.) Sometimes we had to physically shake the students out of stupor. We'd make them stand or send them out to wash their faces (but that was taking a risk because they might never return.) As a last resort, if the student simply could not remain conscious in the classroom, we'd send him with a report to the duty officer, who would usually punish the student by having him run laps around the parade



ground. This didn't make matters any better of course, because when he returned to the classroom not only would he be resentful but he'd also be even more tired than when he left.

What did I get out of the experience (besides a healthy pay cheque)? If nothing else. I learned that when you are faced with the realities of getting 200 or so students to pass

a very difficult exam and you only have 1 year to do it, many of the current theories of language teaching go out the window. The natural approach? Suggestopedia? The direct method? They were all entirely too self-indulgent. The problems were overwhelming, but the experience did provide me with a healthy respect for realities of military or industrial English Language Training.