

SOAS LANGUAGE CENTRE

LEARNER SUPPORT

LEARNERS' VOICES: How We Learnt Arabic

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Student: Gabi Baur

Level: Diploma in Modern Standard Arabic (course completed in August 2007)

1. Tell us a few things about yourself. What do you do? How many languages do you speak? When did you start learning Arabic, and why? What's your level of Arabic at the moment?

Prior to studying for the Diploma in Arabic I worked as a credit analyst in the financial sector. Even at that stage languages were quite important as the clients I dealt with and the relevant information on them tended to be in German and Spanish. Although many people in both countries speak English, they generally prefer to speak in their own language particularly where complex subjects are involved and they need to express themselves very accurately.

I speak and understand three languages comfortably: German, because it is my mother tongue, English because I have lived here for years and years and Spanish as I have used it in business for almost twenty years. Arabic is of course a different story. There I am at the beginning. Still, thanks to the year's diploma course I can understand the general drift of items on the news on television and some simple stories in films. Moreover, I can communicate with Arabic speakers on some topics and in some situations at a straightforward basic level (but still using both hands and all ten fingers to help make the point(s)!). I can also understand straightforward newspaper articles with the (still extensive) use of a dictionary.

2. What do you find most enjoyable about learning Arabic?

The greatest enjoyment to me is being able to "decipher" the script, which a year ago looked impenetrable to me. When I first saw our textbook (Al Kitaab) last year I thought I would never be able to learn to read and understand any of it. So, when bit-by-bit the script became more familiar, and less frightening, and I was able to "decipher" and understand the words, this was the most rewarding part of learning the language.

3. What do you find most difficult about learning Arabic, and why?

Initially, the unfamiliar script was the greatest obstacle particularly as I remember vocabulary often visually. The unfamiliar script made it quite difficult to remember vocabulary. In addition, I think the grammar is quite detailed with many rules, which make speaking the language correctly a challenge. Writing it seemed easier as there is slightly more time and the possibility to make corrections. I also thought that having learnt Latin at school was helpful because the logic of the grammar seemed similar to me.

4. What kind of resources do you use outside the classroom? Do you practise speaking with native speakers of Arabic?

I am quite interested in Islamic culture and the economies and politics in the Middle East so I watch Arabic satellite TV avidly. Mostly I tend to watch news programmes or programmes on a country's culture, architecture, the economy etc., i.e. on topics that interest me. First of all, TV helps me to

remember vocabulary. Words that I have heard in the context of something or were spoken by somebody are easier for me to remember, i.e. their sound.

I found news programmes very helpful. The vocabulary tends to be more limited than for example in films, where the topics and conversations can vary widely. Hence words get repeated often, which is good revision of vocabulary. Also, programmes on history and architecture are “easier” as the subject/object discussed tends to get shown so it becomes obvious what it is about. Discussion programmes are much harder as there is usually only the spoken word.

5. *Choose one area (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, script) or skill (speaking, listening, reading, writing) that you think you are very good at. Can you share your top tips with us?*

See above.

6. *What was your most embarrassing Arabic faux-pas?*

My worst faux-pas so far was to mix up the word for “seat” with that of “bed” in the first oral exam of the diploma course. Instead of trying to book a **seat** in the cinema I insisted on booking a **bed**. I think the teachers were very kind not to “roll-around” on the floor laughing at the time.

7. *Was there ever a time when you thought ‘I’m not making any progress, I might as well give up’. How did you deal with it?*

Several times. My best solution is to talk it off my chest and unfortunately be a bit of a bore to some of my classmates and my husband. Most have been very kind and patient. Moreover, I tried to remember that this is what I wanted to do, what I stopped work for, so there was no giving-up option.

8. *A lot of adult learners are extremely busy with other things. How do you find the time to learn the language?*

I was very fortunate to do the Diploma in Arabic full-time that meant I could dedicate all my time to it. (Not having any children unfortunately helps, too).

9. *Finally, what advice would you give to anyone learning the language?*

Never give up! We all learn at different speeds. Just because somebody else “picks it up” quicker does not mean that you will never learn it. It is a question of enthusiasm, practice, repetition and perseverance.

Produced by Michalis Sivvas, m.sivvas@soas.ac.uk

For learner support contact David Hanlon at d.hanlon@soas.ac.uk or Michalis Sivvas at m.sivvas@soas.ac.uk

www.soas.ac.uk/languagecentre/students

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