

Graduation Speech - Beginner Level

The Key to Culture

Delivered by Roddy A. Stegemann at the Arabic Language Institute Graduation Ceremony
in the Faculty of Humanity and Arts Building, King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, KSA on 11 December 2011

Dr. Osama Taïb, University President, faculty, fellow classmates, and staff,

Firstly, I would like to thank the Arabic Language Institute for inviting me to speak, Dean Kinsara of the English Language Institute for permitting me to be year this afternoon, and Dr. Al Malki for providing me with his steadfast support in the class room. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Muhamed Saeed Al Ghamdi, Dr. Yasser Babuten, and Dr. Mansur Awaad for their support and permission to make this program possible.

Today, I would like to give you a brief introduction to the study of Arabic as a beginner at the Arabic Language Institute in Saudi Arabia.

MY CLASS

My class is small. Although we are surely more than five, we rarely average more than 4 to 5 students per session. Nearly all of us have learned one second language already, and some of us more than one. Moreover, we are nearly all language teachers, each with a different idea about how a second language should be taught and acquired. As a result, we are very demanding on our teacher and require someone who knows the Arabic language well. Usted Al Malki is both patient and responsive, and is very knowledgeable about the Arabic language.

VOLUNTARY STUDY

Probably, the most studied second language in the world today is English. What makes *our* study of the Arabic Language Institute so very different is that it is not compulsory. After all, learning a second language takes a tremendous effort on the part of the learner, and it is unlikely that he will ever achieve his goal, if his motivation for learning does not come from within. In short, we are here because we want to be here, not because someone has told us that we must.

So, why are we here?

Obviously an important reason for many of us is to learn to read and understand the holy Quran. But, there are other reasons as well, and I would like to touch briefly on these today.

Motivation

THE KEY TO CULTURE - Language and culture are difficult to separate because they are acquired together when we are very young. Certainly they can be acquired separately, but in the absence of one the other is greatly diminished and only very useful in limited circumstances. For example, a Saudi speaking of his culture in English will likely tell a different story than one who speaks of his culture in his native tongue. Similarly, a non-Saudi learning about Saudi culture in any language other than Arabic is likely to understand a story different from the one heard by a non-Saudi Arabic speaker.

COMPARATIVE GRAMMAR - Language is a universal phenomenon. There is no human being who can hear and has a tongue who does not acquire a language. Indeed, language is the tool that we use to acquire culture, and culture is the set of codes of thought and behavior that bind us together and make society possible. Language is fundamental. And, because it is something that is common to us all, we already know a great deal about language in general before we begin learning someone else's. Consequently, we only need someone to point out the similarities and differences between our language and theirs, and we can acquire their language much more easily. As a result, second language learners can learn a second language better from a bilingual instructor who knows well the languages of both the learner and the learner's target language.

OUR ONLY REAL OPPORTUNITY - Language learning can be fun, if it is learned in a proper setting. Certainly, there is no better setting to learn a second language than in a country where the language is spoken by most of its inhabitants. Even in such a setting, however, native speakers tend to avoid non-native speakers until the non-native speaker is sufficiently fluent in the native speaker's tongue to hold a conversation. This is the reason language classes are so important.

Now, in a country like Saudi Arabia, where over 60% of the nation's work force is non-Saudi, it is even more difficult. My gas station attendant is from Bangladesh, my taxi-driver is from Pakistan, and my barista at Starbucks is from Nigeria. My breakfast is prepared by Filipinos, my lunch by Indians, and my dinner by Kashmiris. In short, it is difficult to even find a Saudi with whom to speak.

What is worse, when I finally do find a Saudi, he usually wants to practice his English.

So, it is for these reasons and more, that we must all give thanks to the Arabic Language Institute and its several sponsors.

شكراً جزيلاً لكم!