

## Learning Arabic in the workplace: Anecdotes of language lecturers

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### Abstract

This research explored the reasons, strategies, and insights of Filipino English lecturers in learning Arabic as the language in their workplace. This research used the qualitative-hermeneutic phenomenology and involved two-groups of lecturers. Results revealed that the need to interact with the native speakers was the driving force to learn Arabic; learning Arabic somehow affected English proficiency; participants used different learning strategies; they shared similar and distinct realizations with other Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW); and they only learned common and basic Arabic words. It implies that learning the language of the workplace is inevitable and learning it provides unlimited opportunities.

**Keywords:** learning arabic, work place, anecdotes, language lecturers

### 1. Introduction

Many believed that learning the language of the workplace is essential because it allows someone to connect, to interact, to mingle with, and to make healthy relationships with co-workers, subordinates and others. Antonio, Arangurin, Sorote, and Mina (2016) <sup>[2]</sup> said that learning the language of the workplace is a necessity for a productive business and the inability of someone to learn may led to separation. Thus, language becomes an obstacle for harmonious social relationship. This idea was previously capsulized by Foma (2014) <sup>[11]</sup> who claimed that miscommunication caused by misunderstanding of words, idioms, and context in a workplace if not confronted or solved will hamper performance and relationship. However, this view which concerns that someone needs to assimilate with the language of the workplace is challenged by Peirce (1995) who argued that the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory failed to show the connection between the language learner and the context where he or she works. This shows that a person is not necessarily adopt by the language used in his workplace. Thus, he or she is not obliged to learn the language used in the workplace.

In the Sultanate of Oman, many Filipino English lecturers are hired to teach English language among the Omani students who speak Arabic. And teaching these students become stressful especially when they don't speak in English. As a result, Filipino teachers are forced to learn basic Arabic words and phrases to fill the gap of communication and assimilate with their co-workers. This view is supported by Gonzales (2010) who found that different individuals have their own motivational orientation when learning other languages. He pointed out that someone wants to learn other language for communication, affiliation and self-efficacy; Japanese for career and economic enhancement; French towards affiliation with foreigners, and Spanish for self-efficacy.

In this research, our aim was to determine the anecdotes of Filipino English lecturers in leaning the Arabic language. We also would like to explore the motivations, the strategies, and the insights gained by the participants.

### 1.1 Research Questions

This research explored the stories of Filipino English lecturers in learning Arabic, the language in their workplace. Specifically, this research answered the following questions:

1. What made the Filipino language lecturers learn the Arabic language?
2. What strategies the Filipino language lecturers used in learning the Arabic language?
3. What insights the Filipino language lecturers learned from their experience which could be shared to other language lecturers?

### 1.2 Theoretical Lens

This study was anchored on two theories. The first theory is the Second Language Acquisition developed by Krashen (1987). This theory contends that there are two independent systems of second language performance which are 'the acquired system and 'the learned system'. The 'acquired system' is the product of a subconscious process very similar to the process children undergo when they acquire their first language. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances, but in the communicative act. The "learned system" is the product of formal instruction and it comprises a conscious process which results in conscious knowledge 'about' the language, for example knowledge of grammar rules.

The second theory is the Assimilation Theory also known as Sub-sumption Theory developed by Ausebel (1962). This theory suggests an essential concept for educational process, in which rote learning can be found more frequently. Foreign language learning often requires learning by heart numerous exceptions or grammatical structures. The rote learning becomes easier and longer lasting in case of connecting new material with already learned language concepts.

### 2. Method

Presented in this section were the methods used. It specifically

included the research design, instrument, and participants.

**2.1 Research Design**

This study used the qualitative method specifically the hermeneutic-phenomenology. This research used qualitative because it explored the personal experiences of Filipino lecturers in learning Arabic and its main source of information were interviews and observations. Anfara and Mertz (2014) [1] said that qualitative method is appropriate if a study inquires about the significant and actual experiences. For Bell (2014) [4] qualitative is usually adopted when the perspective of the study is to understand the individuals’ perception and opinion of an experience. While QSR (2010) [23] said that qualitative method is used if the study concerns with lessons learned, attitudes, behaviors, value systems, motivations, aspirations, culture or lifestyles and Cho and Lee (2014) [6] pointed out that qualitative as a method provides insights and enhance discussions.

Hermeneutics-phenomenology was used in this study because the researchers were involved. The researchers were also Filipino English lecturers. Thus, we can share, understand and triangulate our experiences with others. According to Dreyfus (1991) hermeneutic-phenomenology is an appropriate method to uncover the ‘meaning of being human beings’. For Plager (1994) this method is usually used if someone wants to make ‘self-understanding’ on some crucial issues.

**2.2 Instrument**

In obtaining important the essential information, we formulated interview guide questions based on the research questions. The interview guide was composed of three (3) main questions and six (6) probe questions. The questions were open ended to allow the participants expound their answers. The content of the questions was focused on the driving force why Filipino English lecturers need to learn the Arabic language, their learning strategies, and their insights. According to Geer (1991) open-ended questions allow spontaneity of response; while Brown (1994) said open-ended questions generate higher-order

thinking skills. On the other hand, Smyth, Dillman, Christian and McBride (2009) averred that open-ended question ‘improve the response’ of the participants. The research questions were subjected to face and content validity by an expert.

**2.3 Participants**

The participants of this study were the Filipino language lecturers teaching at Gulf College of Oman. The participants were divided into two; one group was composed of lecturers who were teaching 12 months and less and the other group was composed of lecturers who were teaching for more than 12 months. This was done to determine whether the length of stay contributes to the learning of the Arabic language. Jacques and Zelazo (2001) [15] pointed out that grouping is significant in ‘measuring the abilities’ of a group. Moreover, grouping was done to make a triangulation of experiences among the lecturers. Hartley and Sturn (1997) describe triangulation as the ‘necessary point of intersection and by Thurmond (2001) [26] as the combination of at least two data sources. In this study, triangulation was purposely applied to increase the reliability of the findings.

For the purpose of ethical consideration, the researcher hid the identity of the participants through giving pseudonyms. The group with less than 12 months experience as lecturers were given the pseudonyms Ana (I), Huwa (He), Hiya (She), Hom (They), and Nahmu (We) while the other group with more than 12 months experience were given the pseudonyms Ismi (My name), Afwan (You’re welcome), Sukran (Thank you) and Mabrook (Congratulations). These pseudonyms were used in the verbatim quotation in the presentation of the results of the study.

**3. Results**

This section dealt with the findings of the interview conducted among the participants of the study. The information gathered were analyzed using the thematic analysis. Five major themes were identified.

**Table 1:** Learning Arabic in the Workplace

Major Themes	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Inter-action with Arabic native speakers	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Talking and dealing with students</li> <li>▪ Asking students to translate</li> <li>▪ Knowing what the native are talking</li> <li>▪ Transacting shop keepers (canteen)</li> </ul>
Deterioration of English Proficiency	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Affecting the syntax</li> <li>▪ Declining the spelling ability</li> </ul>
	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Making aware of the English language</li> </ul>
Strategies Used	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Talking with native Arabic speakers</li> </ul>
	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Listening to the conversation</li> </ul>
	Variant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Imitating how native Arabic speaks</li> <li>▪ Memorizing the Arabic words</li> <li>▪ Repeating the words</li> <li>▪ Using the same words from time to time</li> </ul>
Realizations on the experience	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Arabic language is just like other language uniquely different</li> <li>▪ Language is vehicle to learning other culture</li> <li>▪ Practicing can help in learning language</li> <li>▪ Adapting different strategies is essential in learning a language</li> </ul>
Helpful words and phrases	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Assalammu Alaikum</li> <li>▪ Kaifhalik</li> </ul>
	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Shukran</li> <li>▪ Moskila</li> <li>▪ Mafi</li> <li>▪ Kalas</li> </ul>
	Variant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Yamin</li> <li>▪ Yassar</li> <li>▪ Sway-sway</li> <li>▪ Alhamdulillah</li> <li>▪ Mafi folus</li> </ul>

### 3.1 Interaction with Arabic Native Speakers

Generally, the participants believed that they need to learn Arabic because they have to interact with their colleagues, students and other native Arabic speakers. For them, learning Arabic language was important for them to survive communicatively. Two participants said,

“It is important because I am dealing with Arabic students. This could help me reach students in their learning process.” (Hiya)  
 “I use basic and simple Arabic words and phrases for survival.” (Sukran)

Two participants shared that they were aware speaking Arabic was not allowed inside the classroom, but learning Arabic was inevitable. Students speak in Arabic and for them to understand the students, they need to learn Arabic. The participants said,  
 “I believe it’s needed in the nature of my job as I deal with Arab students. Though emphasis was given that English is the medium of instruction, there were instances that I am force to learn Arabic because many students speak in Arabic.” (Huwas)  
 Getting along with students daily pushes me to learn basic Arabic language.” (Ismi)

### 3.2 Deterioration of English Proficiency

Most of the participants felt that their English language proficiency was somehow affected by learning the Arabic language. However, the effect only dealt with syntax, spelling and pronunciation. Below were the answers of Hiya, Hom, and Nahmu respectively.

“It really affects my English proficiency since Arabic has different pronunciation.” (Hiya)

“It affects my attitude towards following the correct spelling.” (Hom)

“Sometimes in order to the students to understand me, I have to communicate with them using very Basic English which sometimes leads to committing grammatical errors.” (Nahmu)

However, there were numbers of participants who believed that learning Arabic language had no impact on their English proficiency. They were aware that English and Arabic languages had distinct structures. One of the participants said,

“Learning Arabic does not affect my English proficiency because I see to it that I have still sanity with English language.” (Huwa)

### 3.3 Learning Strategies

The participants had their different strategies in learning Arabic language. This may cause by their different learning abilities. Some were good listeners others were better speakers. Some had good memory and others were good at rote and imitation. Four participants admitted that they preferred listening to a conversation of the native speakers for them to know how to utter the words.

Other participants would like to have direct conversation with the native speakers but because of their limited vocabulary, they used simple and common words. Few of the participants enrolled in a free Arabic language course held at the Philippine embassy. Generally, the participants confided that the strategies they were effective. One of the participants who used conversation strategy said,

“With the conversation approach, I can learn effectively because of the direct interaction with the native speakers.”(Nahmu)

Other participant who used imitation and repetition divulged,  
 “Students can comprehend what I said whenever I shift to Arabic.” (Sukran)

Similarly, the participant who attended the free Arabic language found that learning formal way was helpful but some lessons offered for her was not beneficial in the day to day conversation with the native speakers. She revealed,

“Attending formal class in Arabic is helpful; however, some lessons given were not helpful like reading and writing Arabic characters.” (Ismi)

### 3.4 Realization of the Experiences

Interestingly, the participants had typical views on the Arabic language. As the usual belief of language majors, they believed that Arabic is a unique language just like any other language. They said,

“Arabic just like any other language has its own nuances, peculiarities, and beauty.” (Ana)

“The language is unique and needs throaty skills because most of the words need pharynx and throat sound.” (Huwa)

“In Arabic language uses only one tense. Native speakers hardly pronounce “p” and they are not particular with spelling.” (Hom)  
 For few participants, thought that by learning the Arabic language, they could able to discover the culture of the Arab people. While others mentioned that to learn the Arabic language, practice was needed.

### 3.5 Helpful Words and Phrases

After staying in Oman and teaching Arab students for the span of four months to more than four years, the following words were considered by the participants as the most commonly used. They found these words and phrases significant in their day to day conversation with native speakers.

Arabic Words / Phrase	English Translation
as-salaamu ‘alaykum	peace be upon you
Kaifhalik	How are you?
Shukran	thank you
Moshkelah	problem
Mafi	none
Kalas	finish
Yamiin	right
Yassar	Left
sway-sway	slowly
al-hamdu lillah	praise be to God
mafi folus	There is no money.

## 4. Discussion

This section deals with the summary and implications of the findings of the findings on the experiences of the Filipino teachers in learning Arabic language. Included in this section are the literatures which support the results of the study.

### 4.1 Interaction with Arabic Native Speakers

Generally, the participants want to learn Arabic language because they wanted to interact with them. However, they admitted that they only need to know the basic and common words and phrases which they can use in conversation. They usually interact with students who have less or not proficient in English. Two lecturers said,

“The illiteracy of some students in speaking English forces me to learn Arabic, at least the basic.” (Nahmu)

“I need to learn Arabic to interact with speakers.” (Ismi)

On the other hand, participants want to learn Arabic for functional purposes like asking for something, buying goods, talking with taxi drivers and many others. Moreover, participants

want to learn Arabic for them to understand what the natives are conveying to them. Kayi (2012) <sup>[16]</sup> pointed out that second language learners want to gain knowledge of the target language to interact, communicate and collaborate. Antonio *et al.* (2016) <sup>[2]</sup> found that Filipinos need to learn Korean in the workplace to be efficient and widen their scope at work; to understand each other; and to have a harmonious relationship with each other.

#### 4.2 Deterioration of English Proficiency

Generally the participants believed that their English language proficiency was affected by learning the Arabic language. It is worthy to point out that English is not the first language of the lecturers but a second language. They obtain proficiency of the English language through formal education. In the Philippines, English is taught and used in schools from kindergarten to college. Thus, Arabic language becomes another second language. The participants pointed out that syntax and phonology are somewhat affected by learning Arabic. The reason behind this was Arabic and English languages have great numbers of differences in these areas. Shoebottom (2016) <sup>[24]</sup> general describes that Arabic language comes from the Semitic language while English is from Anglo-Frisian dialects; hence their grammars are substantially different. In phonetics, Flege and Port (1981) the plosive /p/ is absent in Arabic; substituting it with /b/. There is an analogous difference between the sounds of /t/ and /d/ and /k/ and /g/. Shoebottom (2016) <sup>[24]</sup> also found that aside from substitution and swapping there is also addition of extra vowels such as in the words *split* to *spilit*; *threw* to *ithrew* or *length* to *lengthes*. Mansouri and Alreemawi (2007) <sup>[20]</sup> added that for non-arabic speakers, some Arabic letters as glottal fricatives and uvular stops are little strange and can be challenging to pronounce.

#### 4.3 Strategies Used

Interacting with the native Arabic speakers using the target language can be classified into as direct-learning method. Through this method, the learner is forced to speak the target language and in the end able to grasp a view of the target language. In this learning style, the learner can be able to clarify some issues like pronunciation, vocabulary and spelling involved in the language. This result coincides with Ladd and Ruby (1999) <sup>[19]</sup> who conducted a study among expatriate students who were exposed to second language. They found that expatriate learners preferred to learn by direct experience. For Kolb and Kolb (2012) <sup>[18]</sup> learners who placed experience at the center of the learning process makes a dynamic of learning by the resolution of 'dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience and abstraction aside from adaptation' and total immersion and assimilation. We believe that Filipino lecturers use this direct-method of learning other language because of their nature as multilingual. The Philippines has 171 coded languages. We were personally exposed to this multi-linguistic environment. At home, speak in different languages but we acquired these languages through direct interaction. Thus, it is safe to imply that direct-method of learning a second language most likely use by people who are bilingual than monolingual. Comparatively, the Filipino factory workers in Korea learning Korean found listening to CD, Korean music and movies, audio tutorials were effective way of learning the language (Antonio, *et al.*). These strategies are not mentioned by the Filipino lecturers.

#### 4.4 Realization of the Experiences

It is observed that Filipino English lecturers learning Arabic language have similarities and distinct realizations compare to those Filipino factory workers in Korea. Filipino English lecturers in Oman and Filipino factory workers in Korea believed that they need to learn the language of the workplace to understand each other during interaction, to understand the culture, to have harmonious relationship, and to communicate with others. However, the lecturers are more appreciative of the language compare to the factory workers. They pointed out that Arabic is a unique language just like other language. This is an indication that Filipino lecturers look at the totality of the language not solely on its functionality.

Others realized that in order to learn Arabic language, practice should be done. Younes (1990) <sup>[28]</sup> and Ward (2016) <sup>[27]</sup> advised that someone needs to invest long hours into Arabic language practice to learn it.

#### 4.5 Helpful Words and Phrases

The participants learn basic and common Arabic words and phrases for survival purposes. As mentioned on the first them, they need these words and phrases in interacting with their students and colleagues. It is observed that most participants' learned words which show politeness like "as-salaamu 'alaykum" (Peace be upon you) which is commonly used in greetings; "kaifhalik" (How are you?) Which is used to ask someone of his/her conditions. Also, al-hamdu lilah" (praise be to God) is uttered when someone is happy and excited about a certain news or occasion. According to Chromlea (2016) being courteous is an essential characteristic of Arab-speaking countries.

Other helpful Arabic words and phrases are commonly used in given directions "yamiin" (right) and "yassar" (left); conversation which involves questions "moshkelah" (problem), "kalas" (finish) and reply "mafi" (none), "sway-sway" (slowly).

#### 5. Implications

Learning the language of the workplace is not easy; however, it is inevitable to do so that understanding and communication between the foreign workers and native speakers prevail. Thus, foreign workers may orient themselves about the language of the place where they intend to work. Also, there is no one strategy fits all dictum in learning a language. Different learners will opt to have his/her learning technique based on his abilities. Hence, some learners may be good in listening, some in imitating, some in interacting, and some in memorizing. Moreover, different individuals see learning language according to his experiences and needs. Thus, a teacher has distinct views on language compare to those who are factory workers, engineers, doctors, nurses, janitors, and store keepers. But one thing is certain; learning the language of the workplace gives unlimited advantages.

In our case, learning Arabic is difficult because syntactically it has different structure with our native language. However, it is not an excuse for us not to learn the Arabic because we accepted the challenge of our job. We need to assimilate and mingle with the people in a language they can understand. It should us not them who will adjust. Nonetheless, our job is to teach English; hence, we need to do what we are tasked to do. We understand that English should be the medium of communication and Arabic must be refrained but not discontinued.

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