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ABSTRACT

This is a collection of papers which discusses characteristics of ESL (English as a Second Language) students in Kuwait. The first chapter, "Oral Communication," notes the extreme facility with which these students communicate in English. Chapter Two, "Names," explains how people in Kuwait are named and addressed. Chapter Three, "The Effects of Diglossia," discusses the differences between Kuwaiti Arabic (for informal usage) and Modern Standard Arabic (written language) and how the students erroneously attribute the same dichotomy to spoken and written English. The fourth chapter, "What's the Antonym for 'Work'?" attempts to explain why these students give "unemployment" rather than "play," as most Americans would, as an antonym for "work." "Speaking" was the overwhelming response to a questionnaire asking which language skill was the most important, as reported in the fifth chapter, "Report on Student Preference." Chapter Six, "For Nothing," analyzes possible reasons for using this expression in response to "Thank you." Two common errors are discussed in the seventh chapter, "Two Pronunciation Errors." The eighth chapter, "Empty-Space Fillers," gives Arabic expressions used to fill in pauses while speaking English. The final chapter, "Dormant Reasoning Abilities," explains that when Gulf Arab students do poorly on reading comprehension tests, what they generally need is work on how to reason, rather than more work on reading skills. (CFM)

OBSERVATIONS

OF

STUDENTS IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

AT

KUWAIT UNIVERSITY: 1974-1976

Michael Meinhoff

&

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May/June 1976

Preface

The following papers provide facts as well as observations and opinions concerning English language students at Kuwait University. Over 70% of the students in the classes observed (19 classes; approximately 300 students) have been Kuwaiti, with most of the others coming from Bahrain and other Gulf states.

The subjects chosen are not meant to be all-inclusive but are rather a collection of specific topics. It is the writers' intention, however, that these papers provide an accurate perspective of Gulf Arab students studying English in Kuwait.

Introduction

These papers deal with English language students attending the Faculty of Commerce, Economics and Political Science, one of five colleges which constitute Kuwait University. It is a university requirement that all students pass three one-semester courses in English. Elective English language courses which emphasize reading and conversation are also offered. The English language program began three years ago at the Faculty of Commerce and expanded throughout the entire university system this year (with the exception of the Faculty of Law which requires French).

Kuwaiti students entering the University have had eight years of prior English language study, while students from other Gulf states have had less. University English classes are taught entirely in English with most instructors being native English speakers having special training and qualifications in English as a second language.

Although English is the medium of instruction in both the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Engineering, it is not vital for Faculty of Commerce students, as all their other courses are taught in Arabic.

Contents

Oral Communication

Spontaneous, Exuberant, Uninhibited. Gulf Arab students approach oral language learning in a much different way than students from most other cultures. Even though they often speak ungrammatically in English, Gulf Arab students converse openly and freely. They tend to be spontaneous, exuberant and uninhibited in their use of English in the classroom. Because they are fortunate enough to lack the inhibitions which so often impair language learning, these students give immediate responses as opposed to slower, more thoughtful answers characteristic of most other language learners.

With most foreign language learners, the willingness to make grammatical errors (which are the inevitable consequence of trying to communicate freely and naturally in the target language) does not come easily. In fact, one of the most difficult tasks normally confronting the language teacher is establishing an environment in which students feel free to communicate orally without worrying about grammatical correctness. However, it is not necessary to work at creating this type of environment in Kuwait, as it already exists.

The willingness of Gulf Arab students to respond voluntarily to oral questioning is overwhelming. For example, when the teacher asks a question, the majority of the students either immediately raise their hands indicating that they want to respond or they shout out spontaneous answers. Although one student may have already answered the question, others may state with equal authority the response they have in mind.

Along with unhesitant, free-flowing oral responses, Gulf Arab students use language-accompanying gestures to the fullest without appearing unnatural or stilted. This gives them the appearance of communicating orally to a greater extent than their words alone might indicate.

We have a Kuwaiti friend who, when he visits us, is always the center of conversation. We had always considered his oral English to be quite good, at least until we were asked to write a detailed evaluation of his English language abilities. Discriminating between grammaticality and ungrammaticality as opposed to previously being aware of communication and non-communication, it suddenly became apparent that his grammatical use of English was atrocious. Yet he could communicate with facility.

In short, most Gulf Arab students are willing to participate orally, even though they may not always be adept grammatically. They speak self-assuredly without pausing to reflect; unaware (and in a certain sense, not caring) that their speech is often

ungrammatical. They are self-confident, gregarious, group-minded, and enjoy communicating verbally.

Certain cultural factors: gregariousness, self-assuredness, unrestricted behavioral freedom, sexual segregation, and Arabic diglossia enhance the Gulf Arab student's particular facility with oral English. The following is an elaboration of these conditions.

1. Gregariousness. Aside from the amount of conversing that goes on in the classroom, both in English and Arabic, there are other signs of the Gulf Arab's gregarious nature. While Western and Oriental students are accustomed to individual study, Gulf Arab students work better in groups. If there is a problem to be solved, they prefer to approach it together. Assignments done in pairs or by small groups of students are frequently of higher quality than those done individually.

The students' preference for working together in the classroom could stem from the fact that they seldom do things individually in their social environment. While girls often have tea together, and have many occasions for parties (females only), most men belong to a "dewania", i.e., a social group for men, which meets nightly. Houses are built with a separate room for the men to have a place to meet and socialize. Constant group interaction and conversation are the result of living conditions which include numerous children and extended families of seven to twenty people living together under the same roof.

This togetherness and emphasis on conversation is a factor contributing to their facility in using a foreign language for purposes of oral communication.

2. Self-Assuredness. Self-assuredness, which must be encouraged in many other foreign language students, is already present in Gulf Arab students. They speak out confidently, never hesitating over grammatical exactness. In fact, they don't accept criticism well and don't always acknowledge error as such. Arabs tend not to admit when they don't know something. For example, when asking for directions a person may often be sent to the wrong place, but he is rarely told by the Arab informant that he (the informant) simply doesn't know where the place in question is.

This attitude works to the students' advantage when using a foreign language. For example, when a Gulf Arab student loses track of the conversation, or is asked a direct question he doesn't understand fully, he seldom lets on. Instead, he may say something about what he did understand in the conversation and carry on to elaborate his point. Gulf Arabs often have the ability to dominate the conversation and, to a large degree, determine its direction.

This self-assuredness, sometimes bordering on arrogance, could stem in part from a sense of security developed in the group ethic. It also appears to be a manifestation of a social prestige currently felt by the "nouveau riche" Arabs. Kuwaitis, in particular, are proud and ethno-centric.

3. Unrestricted Behavioral Freedom. Kuwaiti children are relatively free to do as they please. They run, play and talk seemingly unrestrained in public as well as in private. They are adored and coddled by almost everyone. If they break something, it can be replaced. If they are too rowdy, the maid can take them out. Nonetheless, there are certain limitations concerning their behavior in the presence of their father.

This lack of restraint continues into adulthood within the spheres not dictated by tradition and religion. Girls can buy gold and all the clothes they want; boys can race their new cars and go out nightly. They spend a good deal of their time with members of the same sex within the extended family. They are used to unrestrained verbal expression and are constantly giving their firm opinion on any number of issues open to question.

4. Sexual Segregation. Young men and women live in different worlds and are taught separately at the University as well as throughout the entire educational system. The Faculty of Commerce, Economics and Political Science is considered by Kuwaiti standards to be co-educational and very progressive. While men and women do walk around the same grounds, they do not study together in the same classrooms. The Kuwaitis, in particular, do not feel free (because of tradition) to engage in open conversation with members of the opposite sex outside the classroom. This sexual segregation may well be a factor contributing to freedom from inhibitions which appear to

develop in co-educational classes in other cultures.

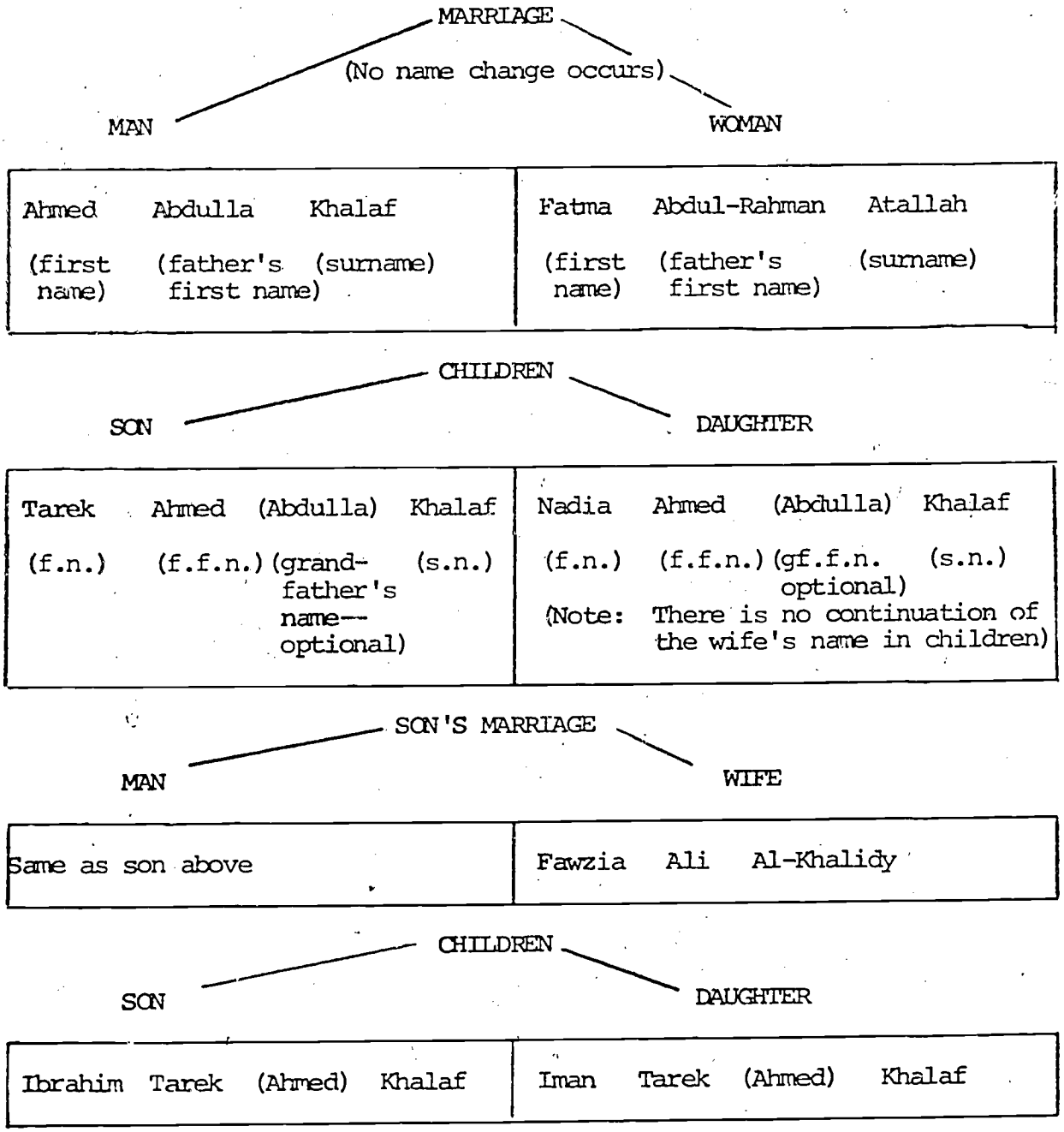
5. Arabic Diglossia. Because Gulf Arab students speak a language variation which they consider not to have a grammar, they may also think that grammatical distinctions in spoken English are unimportant. Grammatical scrutiny is certainly considered in Modern Standard Arabic, but this language variation is used primarily in written form and is only spoken by the educated in formal situations. Kuwaiti Arabic, on the other hand, is spoken by all Kuwaitis in their everyday conversations with friends and family. It is this language variation which is considered to be free from hard and fast grammar rules. It's no wonder, then, that students who see their own language dichotomized into colloquial and standard forms (one simple and natural, the other grammatical and rule-bound) assume that the same framework exists in English.

Names

Mr. Mike. When Gulf Arab students use English, they tend to call westerners and Arabs alike by a proper title (Mr., Mrs., Miss or Dr.) and their first name. Therefore, I introduce myself the first day of class as "Michael Meinhoff" and carefully explain that I may be called "Mr. Meinhoff" or simply "Michael" or "Mike, but that "Mr. Mike" should not be used. Although most students understand the distinction between "Mr.", "Mrs." and "Miss", and are usually able to state the correct title plus last name when asked directly, they are frequently unable to address or refer to westerners correctly in their own speech.

When investigating the Arabic language, the reason for this consistent error becomes clear. In Arabic, the titles are /saɪr d/ (Mr.), /saɪr dɔ/ (Mrs.), and /anrsah/ (Miss). (As yet there is no equivalent for "Ms.") These titles are used with a person's first name in Arabic. For example, a married woman named Fatma Abdulla Al-Rifai would be called "Saida Fatma", except on formal occasions when "Saida Fatma Al-Rifai" would be used. On no occasion would the Arabic speaker link the title with the surname: hence "Saida Al-Rifai" would never be used. It is clear, then, that the confusion in knowing how to use titles and names properly in English is due to the fact that Arabs generally transfer the Arabic rules concerning names directly into their English speech.

The Naming Procedure. The following chart illustrates the naming process through three generations:



From this chart one can observe the process whereby the father's family name and first name are always passed on to the children. His first name is used as a middle name for all of his children--boys and girls alike. The grandfather's name is optional: it may or may not be used. When used, it becomes the second middle name.

The custom of a woman changing her last name at the time of her marriage does not exist in the Gulf. A woman keeps her last name forever, but is not able to pass it on. Her last name, therefore, remains different from her husband's and children's last name. It is only formal documents such as her passport that bear both her own name and the name of the man to whom she is married.

The Telephone Book. In the telephone book in Kuwait, names are listed alphabetically in Arabic according to the first name. For example, if you want to call Mohammed Ali Mohammed Al-Khalidy, you must first look under the Mohammeds. Then, you need to locate the Mohammed Alis. If there is more than one Mohammed Ali, you need to check the third or last name.

A Strange New System. Recently in Kuwait a "strange" system of naming has appeared from time to time in the society page of the local Arabic newspapers; and it has caused Gulf Arabs some confusion. For example, under a picture of a man and woman at a formal gathering, it might be said that Sheikha Al-Mandani and Mohammed Al-Mandani were present. This normally indicates to Gulf Arabs that the two people, Sheikha and Mohammed, are probably brother and sister. However, the picture shows Mohammed and his wife!

Because Gulf Arab women keep their full name in tact even after marriage, a western man and wife are consistently asked a few seemingly odd questions when presenting documents with their names on them. For example, my name is Michael Meinhoff and my wife's name is Joan. "Is she your sister?" is the first question I am asked about Joan

Meinhoff. If I simply say "no", the second stated assumption might be "Oh, she's your daughter, then".

(3)

The Effects of Diglossia

English Doesn't Have A Grammar! When Gulf Arab students speak in English, they are generally free-wheeling and spontaneous; that is to say, they are vocally uninhibited. In addition, they are in full control of language-accompanying gestures. They speak to communicate; and have learned to get by without paying much attention to the "rules" of the language. Consequently, their ability to communicate orally is quite good, as they not only speak freely, but also appear to understand what is being said around them. In comparison, their ability in reading and writing English is much lower. However, what is the most surprising is that their scores on basic structure or grammar tests are extremely low in simple comparison to their ability to communicate orally.

For most of us who have studied a foreign language this is an unusual situation. We have learned foreign languages through believing that we were discovering grammar rules which concurrently allowed us to develop our ability to master the language. We took the mastery of these rules to go hand in hand with our progression in the target language.

It is interesting to note, then, that Gulf Arab students don't generally follow this line of thinking. In fact, more than one Arab student has tried to convince me that the English language doesn't really have a grammar; and that if I want to know what a grammar really is, I should study Modern Standard Arabic!

To understand these students' reasoning about grammar and why the development of their English language skills differs from most other language learners', we need to look into their Arabic language background.

Diglossia: An Explanation Of The Students' Arabic Language Background. Charles Ferguson wrote a paper in 1959 entitled "Diglossia" in which he characterized a language environment which, in fact, exists in Kuwait and the other Arab Gulf states with respect to Arabic. Ferguson defines diglossia as

> a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.[1]

Applying the above definition to the language situation in Kuwait, we can see that Kuwaiti Arabic is a dialect of Arabic, or more specifically, the regional standard variety of Arabic. On the other hand, Modern Standard Arabic is a superposed variety of Arabic. To say that Modern Standard Arabic is "superposed" means that it is never the primary, native variety of the language learned by children in the normal way a mother tongue is learned, but is, instead, taught formally

[1] C.A. Ferguson, "Diglossia", Word, vol. 15, 1959.

in the schools.

Function. Two varieties of Arabic, i.e., Kuwaiti Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic, are used by Kuwaitis. Kuwaiti Arabic is appropriate in some circumstances and Modern Standard Arabic in others. The following chart explains the situations in which each variation is used.

LANGUAGE SITUATION	MODERN STANDARD ARABIC	KUWAITI ARABIC
1. Conversation with family and friends		X
2. Conversation with servants, workmen and clerks		X
3. Discussion groups at the University		X
4. Kuwaiti plays on T.V.		X
5. Writing a letter	X	
6. Newspapers	X	
7. A formal speech	X	
8. News broadcasts	X	
9. Textbooks	X	

The Effects Of Diglossia On Gulf Arabs Learning A Foreign Language. Many of the Gulf Arab students have a problem determining the difference in English between grammatically acceptable language variations and ungrammatical statements. That is to say, when a student makes an error in English like "He go to school", he may feel that what he has said would be quite acceptable in most informal spoken situations, but that the teacher is just trying to teach him a formal language

variety which he would probably never have occasion to use anyway; that is, unless he plans on giving formal speeches or broadcasting the news in English!

This problem of not being able to recognize the difference in English between the colloquial and the ungrammatical stems from the students' Arabic language background. Kuwaiti Arabic is learned as a mother tongue but is not taught in school, whereas Modern Standard Arabic is taught in school but never learned as a mother tongue. As a consequence, from the Kuwaiti students' point of view, Kuwaiti Arabic simply doesn't have a formal grammar, for it is never studied or analyzed in the classroom. Modern Standard Arabic, on the other hand, is seen to have a complex grammar, and everyone must study the complexities of this language in school.

Is English a language like Kuwaiti Arabic or a language like Modern Standard Arabic; or is English to be seen as dichotomized in terms of function the same way Kuwaiti Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic are? Because Arab students feel that Modern Standard Arabic has an intrinsic prestige and aloofness like no other language, they may see foreign languages in the same way as they see other Arab dialects, which in their spoken form can vary one from the other to the degree of mutual unintelligibility. Following this line of reasoning, Gulf Arabs might conclude that foreign languages like English have no real explicit grammar when

simply used for ordinary conversation. Therefore, when English teachers talk about grammatical correctness in colloquial speech, many Gulf Arab students have difficulty in understanding this seemingly undue concern for something that is not rule-oriented and that should simply come about naturally with time and use.

One of the major obstacles other foreign language learners often face is learning to speak freely and naturally. Language students in general are very conscious of grammatical rules and are always concerned with applying them correctly in their speech. As often happens, this concern stifles their free response and causes them to speak in an awkward fashion. As a result, their speech is choppy and language-accompanying gestures are generally not used. In short, their speech is usually quite unnatural.

In contrast, Gulf Arab students possess an important psychological advantage in language learning due to Arabic diglossia. Because Kuwaiti Arabic (which is used for ordinary conversation) is not considered to have a bona fide grammar and is never analyzed in school, the students are not overly concerned with making grammatically correct utterances when speaking in English. As a result, they are remarkably spontaneous and uninhibited in their use of oral English.

What's The Antonym For "Work"?

What's The Antonym For "Work"? When five classes of Gulf Arab students were asked to give the antonym for "up", they all said "down". And so it went with "black-white", "near-far", "married-single", "optomist-pessimist", etc. But when asked for the antonym for "work", most of the students replied "unemployment". Although "unemployment" is certainly a legitimate antonym for "work", "play" would be the primary response of most Americans. Could this seeming variation between the responses by Gulf Arab students and Americans in general be due more to a cultural difference than to a difference in English language proficiency?

Cultural Background. Americans see "play" as being the opposite of "work" because of a particular value system which not only emphasizes this dichotomy but also gives it an emotive bias. This is due to an early Puritan influence in America; and even today work is seen by many Americans as being morally good, while non-work or play is seen as being morally bad.

A criticism which may be made of Americans is that they are so work-oriented that they have difficulty occupying them-

selves off the job and often extend their work-week beyond the accepted 40 hours. When Americans are on the job they are supposed to work hard. It is only after a hard day's work that they may turn their attention to relaxation or to having fun.

Compared to Americans, Gulf Arabs don't generally work as hard on the job and, therefore, may not see work and play as being dichotomized. They are more relaxed at work than Americans generally are. For example, Arab employees in Kuwait may be seen reading a newspaper or drinking tea leisurely at their desks, while their counterparts in America are forbidden to read "on the job" and can only "take a break" from work at a designated time and in an assigned place.

Continous social exchanges are another feature of the Arab's work day which makes it seem less structured than an American's work day. In American society social exchanges with people encountered on the job are kept to a minimum. In most cases Americans would consider it wrong to "socialize" on the job. In an Arab society, however, socialization is a vital part of almost every encounter. Westerners often make the mistake of entering an office or shop and asking an Arab an immediate question concerning some business at hand. Their question is usually met with a smile and, "First, how are you?". Then after a friendly greeting, "Sit down", "Take your rest", "Do you want anything? Tea? Pepsi?". It is difficult for someone brought up on the "work-play" dichotomy

to recognize that nothing seems to be hurried in Kuwait. There always seems to be plenty of time to do whatever needs to be done; if not today, tomorrow or "after tomorrow".

Sociolinguistics. In order to help explain why most Gulf Arabs choose "unemployment" as an antonym for "work", an analysis of the students' own cultural frame of reference could be helpful. Some sociolinguists might claim that the students' response is due to certain factors related to their society in general. For example, because Gulf Arab society is spared the work ethic stemming from the Puritan religion, and because work and relaxation are both an integral part of life "on the job", the idea of work being diametrically opposed to play doesn't have much cultural support. Therefore, "work" may primarily be viewed in terms of employment, i.e., having a job. And, of course, the antonym for "work" in the sense of having a job is "unemployment".

In the absence of more investigation, many theories about why Gulf Arabs tend to choose "unemployment" as the antonym for "work" could be presented. Some sociolinguists might claim that these particular students' response is due to the fact that they are all Faculty of Commerce students and that they are simply responding within a business or technical frame of reference.

Although there are many possibilities, including the one that cultural or social factors don't play any significant part

in the students' choice of the word "unemployment", this paper provides an example of how significant social considerations can be in providing explanations for certain language behavior.

(5)

Report On Student Preference

A questionnaire was given to the Faculty of Commerce English language students during the middle of the Spring Semester, 1976. Out of approximately 600 registered students studying English, 408 filled out the questionnaire. This indicates that just over two-thirds of the students were given the questionnaire (the remainder were either absent on the day the questionnaire was circulated or were in a section in which the instructor did not circulate the questionnaire).

The students were asked to choose from four basic language skills (i.e., SPEAKING, READING, WRITING, LISTENING) which aspect of English they were most interested in learning. They were also asked to indicate which skill they felt would be the most useful to them in their future careers.

The Skill The Students Are Most Interested In Learning. More than two-thirds of the students chose SPEAKING (69.2%) as the aspect of English they were most interested in learning. Barely over one-tenth of the students chose READING (12.9%) or LISTENING (11.4%) as the skill they wanted to develop most. WRITING was considered by only 6.5% of the students as having top priority.

The Skill Needed Most For Their Future Career. Over three-quarters of the students chose SPEAKING (78.4%) as the English

language skill destined to be the most useful to them in their future careers. The other three skills were each chosen by well under 10% of the students as being of primary importance on the job (READING and WRITING were each chosen by 7.5% of the students; LISTENING by 6.6%).

Conclusion. The above figures indicate a preference for SPEAKING as the skill the students would like to see emphasized in their English language courses. The remaining three skills were all preferred by approximately the same low percentage of students. Therefore, no very clear second, third or last choice is indicated by the results.

What About LISTENING? It is interesting to find that LISTENING rates so much lower than SPEAKING in the students' estimation, since from the language teacher's point of view, these two skills are seen to be very complementary. For example, when a student speaks in class, it is hoped that his classmates will be able to understand what is being said, if for no other reason than to be able to respond. Language teachers tend to believe that half the ability involved in speaking a foreign language comes from being able to understand what is being said.

Nevertheless, there have been courses designed to give primary stress to SPEAKING alone, but these have generally been for beginners. They stress that the student continually repeat phrases or sentences, and that they work with highly structured

material often in the form of pattern practices or other such drill aimed at controlled variant word manipulations. Under these conditions, students can at times respond correctly without knowing what they are actually saying. In this kind of language learning no real communication in the target language actually takes place. A course of this type would be highly unsuited to Gulf Arab students who truly seem to enjoy communicating in English.

In fact, what the English language students at the Faculty of Commerce want and view as being of primary importance is a course (or courses) in oral communication; that is, a course which emphasizes the development of both the speaking and listening skills. In this type of course listening comprehension should be considered an integral and equal part of a curriculum which encourages and, in fact, demands student oral participation.

If this is the type of English program the students want, why the wide variance between the percentage of students who chose SPEAKING and those who chose LISTENING? First of all, the listening skill may be assumed to develop when one considers SPEAKING as the skill to be emphasized. However, the reverse is not true. In a listening course it cannot be assumed that SPEAKING will be emphasized. Secondly, Gulf Arabs are very gregarious and verbally uninhibited. Speech is seen by them to be a very positive attribute. It could be that simply listening without speaking (without contributing orally) is regarded in their own speech environments as a

sign of either disinterest or ignorance.

During several rather formal lectures in English on either language teaching or linguistics, it was observed that the Arabs who teach English were, by and large, quite verbal either during the lecture, in terms of trying to second guess the lecturer, or after the lecture, in terms of asking questions. The second guessing was noticeable in that the words blurted out so assuredly were often "off the track". The questions posed to the lecturer were noticeable in that they often seemed inappropriate, or to be statements rather than questions. This seems to be an example of an Arab's tendency to "listen actively". In other words, responding to the lecture may have been just as important as listening to it.

Another factor which may explain the students' strong preference for SPEAKING over LISTENING is that there already exist two commonly accessible and very popular outlets for listening to English in Kuwait. One is American programs on Kuwait television such as "The Mystery Movie", "Kung Fu" and "Gunsmoke". The other is American films regularly shown at a number of theaters in town. Although the students have these two readily available outlets for listening to English outside the classroom, many students claim that they never have occasion to speak English outside the classroom. This may account, in part, for the students' general consensus that practice in speaking is more important in the classroom than practice in listening.

28

(6)

"For Nothing!"

The Gulf Arab students observed at the Faculty of Commerce almost always respond to "Thank you" with the expression "For nothing". It is interesting to explore why and where the students picked up this expression, for it is not one that is used by native speakers of English.

The most common response by native speakers of English to "Thank you" is "You're welcome". Some other common responses made by native speakers are "Not at all", "Don't mention it", "O.K.", and "Sure". The expression used by native speakers that comes the closest to "For nothing" is "It's nothing".

A Distortion Of "It's Nothing"? Could it be that Gulf Arab students have distorted "It's nothing", a relatively uncommon English response to "Thank you", and come up with "For nothing"? It is doubtful. Students who were interviewed claim that they learned "For nothing" from their former English teachers, but that they had never heard "It's nothing" used in their intermediate and secondary school English classes. This leads one to the conclusion that if, indeed, a distortion of "It's nothing" has been made, it must have been made by the students' previous instructors, who, from the beginning, taught it to the students. The vast majority

of the students' previous English instructors have been Arabs whose native language is Arabic, not English. It seems highly unlikely that they would all come across a relatively uncommon response to "Thank you", distort it, and teach it "en masse" to their students.

A Translation From Arabic? By far the most common response in Arabic for "Thank you" /ˇsukran/ is /afwan/, which is most often translated as "You're welcome". Some other common, but less frequently used responses to /ˇsukran/ are /ahlen/, /mamnun/ and /yahala/. None of these come close to being a literal translation of "For nothing". This leaves real doubt as to the possibility of "For nothing" actually coming from a literal Arabic translation.

A Translation From French? The most common response in French for "Thank you" /mɛrsi/ is /dəriɛ̃/ which can be literally translated as "For nothing". Could it be, then, that the Arab non-native English instructors (who expose all Kuwaiti students to English for 8 years prior to University study) use "For nothing" due to the fact that it is a literal translation in English of the French /dəriɛ̃/? It is possible, since a good many Arab English teachers in the secondary and intermediate schools in Kuwait are Egyptian and have a strong background in French. Assumably they found the literal translation of "derien" more to their liking (and/or more familiar) than the rather strange English expression "You're welcome".

"You're Welcome" Taken Literally. "You're welcome", if thought of literally, does not make as much sense as "For nothing" in terms of a response to "Thank you". Thought of literally, "You're welcome" would seem to be what you might say to someone at the door of your house when you want to usher him in. The Arab English teachers may have thought of "You're welcome" as "You're welcome to my house". Another possible meaning of "You're welcome" is "You have my permission" as in "You're welcome to look around". Therefore, I suggest that the Arab English teachers in the intermediate and secondary schools adopted "For nothing" as a response to "Thank you" because the literal meaning of "You're welcome" does not appear to them to fit as well as the literal translation of the French "de rien".

(7)

Two Pronunciation Errors

The Most Noticeable. The most noticeable and common error Gulf Arabs tend to make is the substitution of /b/ for /p/. For example, students tend to say /barti/ for the English word "party" and /bɪkšɔr/ for "picture". This is quite understandable for Arabic does not have the /p/ phoneme.

The grapheme "ﺑ" in Arabic script corresponds to the /b/ phoneme. It is this grapheme which is used when foreign words normally spoken with a /p/ phoneme are incorporated into Arabic. For example, the word "Pakistan", which is pronounced /bækɪstæn/ by Gulf Arabs, is written in Arabic script with the "ﺑ" grapheme. Similarly the name "Paul" must be written with the initial "ﺑ" in Arabic and, as you would expect, is pronounced /bal/.

The Second Most Noticeable. The second most noticeable pronunciation error Gulf Arabs occasionally make is /ŋk/ for /ŋ/. In other words, a /k/ sound is sometimes added to a word ending with /ŋ/. For example, one can hear /nəʊɪŋk/ instead of /nəʊɪŋ/ for the English word "nothing". This is noticeable when the word normally ending in /ŋ/ comes at the end of an utterance, or is said in isolation.

Although all the students pronounce words ending in /ŋ/ correctly throughout most of their discourse, at times when

they pause or want to be more emphatic, some of them add the /k/ sound to the end of the word. For example, in a short conversation with a student I heard him say /slipɪŋk/ for "sleeping", /laŋk/ for "long", and /dɪstɔrbɪŋk/ for "disturbing". However, this same student also pronounced these and other words ending in /ŋ/ correctly during the same conversation. In other words, /ŋ/ and /ŋk/ are used interchangeably.

This problem stems from the fact that Arabic doesn't have the /ŋ/ sound. Because words ending in /ŋ/ in English are written with a final "ng", they are sometimes over-pronounced by Gulf Arab students. For example, the word "sing" may be pronounced /sɪŋg/, although the /ŋk/ ending is much more common. So it seems that two steps are generally involved in the mispronunciation of /ŋ/. First, the /g/ phoneme is added to the end of the word. Second, the /g/ phoneme is changed to /k/.

The mispronunciation of /ŋ/ can carry over into the writing of English. For example, in Kuwait there is a store selling household goods which has a sign above the door in English reading "STORE FOR HOME THINKS".

(8)

Empty-Space Fillers

/hæðə/.../šɪsmə/.../yæni/ .... These three Arabic words, /hæðə/, /šɪsmə/ and /yæni/, are used by some Gulf Arab speakers of English as empty-space fillers. When there is a break in their speech, or when there might otherwise have been a break in their speech, Gulf Arabs tend to insert one of the above expressions. /hæðə/ means "this", /šɪsmə/ might best be translated as "what you call it" and /yæni/ means "I mean" or "that is".

These words are used in English to varying degrees depending, in part, upon the level of oral fluency the Arab student has attained. It appears that the less able students in English conversation use all three expressions; but the first to disappear as English fluency increases is /hæðə/. The next to go is /šɪsmə/, and the last is /yæni/. It is interesting to note that some Arabs, whose oral fluency is extremely high, still frequently use /yæni/ in their English conversation.

/yæni/. /yæni/ is the most common empty-space filler used in Gulf Arabic, so it's not too surprising that it is also used frequently by Arab students speaking in English. Aside from functioning as an empty-space filler, it also functions as an expression signifying elaboration. These two separate functions of /yæni/ can be identified in English. For example, in

/yæni/ I have a test, /yæni/ I can't come to class today, /yæni/ you must help me /yæni/.

the first and last /yæni/ can be considered as empty-space fillers, while the middle two seem more to be used to signify an elaboration or continuation of thought. The second and third /yæni/ can be considered as an untranslated expression meaning "I mean" or "that is", whereas the first and fourth /yæni/ can not. In other words, if translated into English, the second and third /yæni/ would be acceptable, but the first and fourth would not. /yæni/ is also used in response to such questions as, "How was your weekend?" or "Was the lecture interesting?". In these cases, /yæni/ means "so-so", "not good, but not bad".

What's the significance of all this? Simply that a large number of Gulf Arab students use the Arabic word /yæni/ a good deal of the time when speaking in English.

(9)

Dormant Reasoning Abilities

Introduction. Gulf Arab students tend to do poorly in courses which require them to reason out or analyze problems on their own. When students do poorly on examinations which test reading comprehension, many people assume that what is needed is more work on reading skills. However, what Gulf Arab students generally need is work on how to reason. Reasoning out problems or situations is a skill which can be taught and learned.

Reading. Gulf Arab students often read a passage believing that they understand everything about it. While they are able to answer questions taken directly from the reading, they seem to have much more difficulty in answering questions which require making inferences or drawing conclusions. Comprehension questions are often taken lightly, and subtleties in written materials are often skimmed over and missed.

Writing. Teachers in the Faculty of Science, where English is the medium of instruction, often complain that the students are unable to write on the specific subject asked for on reports or essay examinations. Unless they are allowed to write on something they have studied almost verbatim, they generally have trouble responding to the assigned topic. Again, the problem doesn't

center around the students not being able to express themselves in writing in English, but rather around the fact that they are generally unable to transfer knowledge from one specific or general example to certain similar cases.

Background. The primary reason for the students' inability to make inferences or draw conclusions on their own is that they have never really been required to do so before entering the University. The emphasis in their previous schooling has been on retaining facts and memorizing answers. Even at the university level many students don't actually read the assigned material. They expect the professor to dictate the important material to them during the lectures. As long as the professor only asks them to regurgitate some of the material back to him, they are quite able to survive. However, if the professor suddenly asks students individually, as on a written examination, to respond to a situation not actually elaborated beforehand in class, they are at a loss.

Behavior Indicative Of Dormant Reasoning Abilities. Some Gulf Arab students tend to behave in certain ways in the English language classroom which indicate that they are not thinking analytically. Students often lack patience in answering written questions, fail to read instructions and/or base conclusions on hunches or intuition. What follows is an elaboration of these three indications.

1. Lack Of Patience. When faced with reading comprehension questions requiring analytical thinking, Gulf Arab students generally lack the patience to isolate the correct answer. In answering multiple choice questions, for example, it is important to not only know what you think the correct response is, but also why you think the other responses are incorrect. Some students try to short-cut this thinking process, or are simply not consciously aware of it.

When asked to choose the best answer to the following question, many students chose either "A" or "B".

"Mass commuter transportation" refers to a _____.

A) big machine that controls heavy traffic
B) large traffic jam in an urban area
C) large number of people traveling together

The students who chose "A" claim to have confused the word "commuter" in the question with the word "computer". They knew the meaning of both words, but since at first glance a "mass commuter" seemed to refer to a "big machine", they felt there was no need to look further. The students who chose "B" also claim to have made their choice on the basis of matching a few words like "mass" in the question with "large" in the answer, "transportation" with "traffic", and "commuter" with "urban". It seems that the majority of the students who missed this question did so, not because they didn't know the meaning of the individual words, and not because they didn't know the English sentence structure, but because they didn't take time to read the question carefully and reason out the correct answer from the incorrect ones.

Evidence of lack of patience in looking up the spelling of a word, and of negligence in making sure the word discovered has a suitable definition is openly displayed for all to see. A restaurant in Kuwait which specializes in chicken proudly advertises "Fright Chicken".

2. Don't Read Instructions. Many Gulf Arab students tend not to read the instructions before doing a written assignment or taking a test. They often do very badly simply because they don't understand what's required of them. Even when directions are clearly written at the top of a worksheet, quiet mutterings of /šɪnu haːḍ/ (What's this?) or /šun saʷwi/ (What do we do?) are scattered throughout the room. This does not occur because the students can't read what's before them. All one needs to do in response to the students' questions is point to the word "directions" on the paper and the students make an understanding acknowledgement. But even then the directions may only be looked at long enough for the student to think he probably knows what to do. In other words, directions are rarely read completely for total comprehension.

3. Respond On The Basis Of A General Impression. When asked to choose from two or more alternatives, Gulf Arab students tend to be passive in their thinking. That is to say, they spend little time actively reflecting on the possible choices, but instead choose one on the basis of a few clues, a feeling, or a guess.

When asked to choose the best paraphrase for the following sentence, many students chose either "A" or "C".

Botswana's future seemed as empty as its arid countryside.

A) Botswana, a hot and dry county, had a barren countryside.
B) The years to come in Botswana appeared to be hopeless.
C) Almost nothing grows in the desert in Botswana.

A number of students who chose "A" maintained that they did so on the basis of knowing that the word "arid" in the main sentence meant "hot and dry" which they found in response "A". The students who chose "C" claimed that because the main sentence says the countyside is arid, this means that "nothing grows" as is indicated in "C". Also, some maintained that they knew "C" to be factually correct because Kuwait is an "arid" country and "nothing grows" in the desert in Kuwait; and this is why they chose it.

As indicated by the students' explanations above, the key word in their minds was "arid". This is because "arid" was included as a new vocabulary item and was discussed at length in class before the examination. The students assumed, therefore, that any question with "arid" in it on the examination would (and should) be testing this word directly.

Another example of students choosing an answer on the basis of an impression or feeling rather than on the basis of sound reasoning is the following. The students heard the song "Listen to the Rain" by Jose Feliciano played several times. They were then asked some true and false questions, one of which was "The man singing probably likes the rain". Everyone agreed that the answer

is "true"; however, the reasons for choosing this answer were interesting. A few students said that the song had a good beat and therefore must be a happy song and thus the man singing must like the rain. Another student said the singer wouldn't sing about the rain unless he liked it. Of course, there were also some students in the class who were able to cite the lines in the song that indicated that the singer did, in fact, like the rain.

A good number of Gulf Arab students seem to put little value on reasoning as a means of solving problems. They don't appear to view academic problems as being susceptible to analysis. They either know the answer almost immediately or they don't; and if they don't, they simply use their intuition; i.e., they guess. When given written tasks which are quite challenging, the students may at first try with interest to work them through, but then some of the less motivated readers simply give up, getting the answers from someone else. Also, dictionaries or other aids are rarely used unless required by the teacher. Generally students would rather guess at a needed word than spend time looking it up.

Conclusion. Gulf Arab students score poorly on assignments and tests requiring reasoning not because they are stupid, but because they don't know how to use the intelligence they have. How to reason, i.e., how to think analytically, is a skill that can be taught. Who should teach it to students in Kuwait, and when, are questions open for discussion.