

LIKE GROWING FLOWERS IN THE DESERT: THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE KELSEY LANGUAGE SCHOOL IN AMMAN, JORDAN

By George Kelsey

Starting a language school never entered my wildest dreams! Yet like a Black Iris it grew in the most difficult environment. Strong desert winds blow hot sand and in spite of this the Black Iris pushes through to display unbelievable beauty. The Language School over the years similar to a Black Iris has brought beauty to the lives of people in many parts of the world. However, when I came to Jordan the prognosis was I would not be capable of learning Arabic.

Why? When I was three years old I contracted Scarlet Fever. This left me with total deafness in the right ear. I had committed my life to serving God by sharing His love and helping people outside the USA. Early on we were seriously considering ministry in India.

After transferring to Wheaton College from Providence Bible Institute, Archeology and Biblical History became my major. Staying on in the Wheaton graduate school, Dr. Joseph Free encouraged me to accept the position of graduate fellow in the department. Several months later he gave me the privilege of helping in the excavation of Dothan, a buried city in Palestine about sixty miles north of Jerusalem. We sailed from New York to Beirut in 1953. Debarking in Beirut, I learned the Arabic sentence: “What is the name of this/that?” Traveling by taxi from Beirut through Damascus and Amman we reached Jerusalem. Along the way I peppered the taxi driver with that question and by the time I arrived in Jerusalem had built up a small vocabulary. This vocabulary and the beginnings of the structure solidified in the months of digging with a squad of twelve Arab men.

Friends in Bethlehem suggested we consider serving in the Arab world since few people had learned Arabic for ministry in that area. Also India was reluctant to give visas to Americans. Of course, I learned that Arabic food is much better than curry! They suggested that I go to Amman and visit with Roy Whitman. He had been in Jordan for many years and started ministry in Amman with only four believers. I asked him if I could come and spend two years under his mentorship with his church while perfecting my skills in speaking Arabic. Those two years stretched into nearly forty-five years giving a glimpse as to the difficulty of becoming functional in the language!

The answer to the question as to why I couldn't learn Arabic is that the doctor

our group used to examine candidates in his report to the board said “his health is generally good, but since he can’t hear in his right ear he will probably not learn the language.”

After Martha and I graduated from Wheaton in 1955 and with two children we arrived in Amman. We took some private lessons a few hours a week from high school kids and from some older tutors. I worked on gaining the ability to communicate. I went after the language with every ounce of energy and stamina I could muster. Teachers thought that they should teach an adult non-Arab as they did Arabic high school students who actually knew the language and were only polishing up the fine points. I didn’t really need the fine points before I had mastered the rough points! I spent a lot of time listening, visiting individuals and attending house meetings daily plus trying to fathom the advanced levels that the tutors were trying to get into my mind. I read some from pre-Islamic materials, the golden era of Arabic in the tenth century and more recent literary notables. I don’t know how many hundred books I have read and continue to read even now.

At any rate after several months I began taking part in a church service, giving the introduction to a talk and then my friend Fuad finished the sermon. As time went on the thoughts were more mature and the mistakes very gradually became fewer and my introductions became longer until they became regular sermons, though I realize that buying bread is different from the art of introducing the Bread of Life.

I had gotten a hint of the pattern approach to language learning, but felt the linguist working on that was more interested in linguistic theory than in enabling students to develop functionality in the language. My plan included attending a house meeting or church service each evening and if possible after that to visit some family. I had a notebook and furiously wrote as many words down as I could often creating words with parts of the end of one word and the beginning of the next. But soon I was able to not only get sensible words, but develop to where I could get phrases and sentences and critique the sermon. This kept my mind attentive to the speaker and also fine tuned my ear to hear the contrasting sounds and word choice in explaining things. I wanted to know not how I could say something, but what and how an Arab would say something. I soon attained a level of being able to analyze the theology and the intent of the speaker.

Mr. Whitman did not have a car, so often we would go together in my car to meetings in different parts of Jordan. I would pick his brain for an explanation of different words and parts of grammar. As we twisted around the hills and curves leading to the Jordan valley he explained to me such things as the ten forms. We had rented a house in Jericho in the midst of an orange grove and

would go down once a week to hold meetings. Our Jericho House became a delightful retreat from the blustery winters in the mountain region of Amman.

I never had a plan or vision of starting a language school. After several years our group sent out another couple. They wrote and asked me what they could do to learn the language. I knew that my way of learning had been rather inefficient and took an awfully long time. I decided there should be a better way and started to figure out what one should learn first. I started out with a few sentences and conversations. My thought was that a person should be able to say something in Arabic to his neighbors after the first day and grow from that point on. When some people heard that I was going to teach this couple they asked if they could also study with them. So there were seven who formed two classes. Afaf Bayouk and Asma Maayaah not yet twenty years old began to teach.

At night I would design some conversations and drills, type them up and the next morning they would try them out. One of the students was brilliant and made rapid progress. I assumed he was normal and that all students would do the same. Later it became clear that not all were as gifted as he. This is easy I thought! It didn't take long to hit reality! However, I wanted to design a course not for a scholar, but for an ordinary person such as a nurse, a doctor, or a mother with small children as well as others who wanted to serve and needed Arabic to do so effectively.

A young man in our church asked me to intercede with him in a US Aid English language teaching program. In talking with Dr. Fayez Larudee, the director of the program, about my friend, I asked him what book he thought was best to teach Arabic. He mentioned the names of two or three but said none of them were any good. This agreed with my thoughts and then I mentioned to him my efforts to start teaching a group and writing material for them. He said since I knew Arabic and he knew linguistics I should come and teach him. He'd help me in the development from the linguistic angle. I taught him for six months and never once caught him make an error or indicate the slightest accent in speaking English. Later it became clear that in meetings with Dr. William McElwee Miller in northeast Iran he became a believer when he was a young teenager. Later he went to Princeton Seminary and then the University of Michigan where he received a PhD in linguistics. Then he worked for the State Department. I did a bit of study at Princeton University in Arabic and Linguistics and read a number of books on the subject over the years.

Each morning at eight I tried out various conversations and practiced specific structures of the language. About five minutes into the first lesson he stopped me and asked "Are you trying to kill me? Can't you come back tomorrow?" Then he explained that I was trying to teach him everything in one lesson. He

helped me to internalize the concept of reaching the goal of speaking proficiently by taking small steps, not one gigantic step. It wasn't long afterward that he succumbed to cancer. He and I were writing a book to be used to teach illiterate Jordanians to read. I regret that he passed away at such a young age. His widow returned to the USA with his materials and I never saw the manuscript again. As time went on I rewrote both books of Speaking Arabic at least five times. Each time when we discovered that students were stumbling or struggling, we tried to break things down into smaller steps. I also worked out lessons called Mechanics of Pronunciation as well as an introduction to writing. The last book I wrote was a Dictionary of Evangelical Theological Expressions.

At one stage in trying to set the hierarchy or order of introducing various facets of the language I went down to our delightful house in the fragrant orange grove in Jericho. I wrote a 3x5 card for each structure and then spread them out on the floor of a couple of rooms and just studied them for a while and finally started to work on putting them into an acceptable order. That was the core of understanding the structure and how to arrange them. I had tried several orders of introducing things and feel that the final order was as useful as possible to attain the goal of accuracy in communication in the shortest time possible. That of course would be the least expensive way.

At the same time as I was working with the language school in teaching culture, grammar and advanced literature. I was involved working full time with a church, helping develop the work in Aqaba, building Camp Gilead, serving as treasurer for the relief society and helping translate for the TEE program and later teaching church history and New Testament Greek to Arabic students in Arabic. For the first twenty-five years or so I didn't have a secretary. Finally, a "Jethro" convinced me to hire a secretary. To do all of these things and keep them in balance was part of an ongoing struggle. I am not sure what difference it would have made if I had done nothing else except the school.

The government of Jordan was very gracious to us. I was interviewed several times, had phone calls to my house and even a visit. But they were able to trust me and realized I was not trying to stir up anything religious or political. I made it clear, or at least as clear as I could, that students were there to learn to communicate in Arabic. I wanted them to understand the mind of the Arab. A problem arose when some went contrary to the rules of the government and appeared on university grounds and were soon arrested. Trying to keep that type of student out of prison was always a challenge. Several were asked to leave the country but each time the reason could be traced back to zeal without wisdom.

The design of the program continued to flow out of the need to accurately pronounce the sounds, correctly join words together and finally to clearly

express thoughts. Each aspect of the program was designed to do this. My experience showed that in most university programs, people were expected to know the alphabet and write it correctly in the first few days. My philosophy was diametrically opposite that method. It appears that writing the letters is actually a drawing of the symbols. Most people spent a good deal of time trying to portray the letter. But this meant the other side of the brain dealing with pronunciation never got very far along. I had a number of university students come and they could not pronounce well at all. Often they could not handle the grammar or speak with correct sentence structure. Their language was stilted and a cause of amusement to local people. Using the Arabic letters was a detriment to making rapid economical progress. Some people wanted me to just teach the Modern Standard and criticized me for not doing so. I listened to the criticism and determined if a person simply wanted to be a scholar in Arabic, he would need to study somewhere else. Other criticisms that may have come I would listen to and carefully evaluate, as well as discuss them with the older teachers. I never let the criticism affect the direction of the program. But when it was useful I would incorporate the ideas into the program.

As time went on and after a student had a relatively good pronunciation, knew vocabulary and was speaking with good sentence structure, we added the simple act of the symbol for each letter. Some of the students returned to the States and were way ahead in understanding the language, familiar with the grammar and vowel points and able to move quickly into advanced Arabic. One student I recall was able to get four years of college credit and began graduate school Arabic even though he was an undergrad. Since most students have interacted with romance alphabets, their eyes can move across an entire line while those looking at the Arabic letters would stumble and not do well on the first word.

To maintain this philosophy and approach was a struggle. Seems that everyone wanted to know how to write his name in the Arabic letters! Many of the students have gone on to advanced literature and are productive in the language. I felt that the core of the language was the same in each language area. Usually, small talk and greetings would differ the most. But within weeks one can make the adjustments and move on in the different dialects.

A few irritating things happened. Once, certain students started saying the school was theirs and that they should organize the students and run it! Of course they had no financial responsibilities, were not subject to interrogation by the authorities and had no idea of how an adult non-Arabic speaker could make the most efficient use of his time. We also had a constant struggle in encouraging students to mingle with local Jordanians as many stayed in clusters when they went to Arabic speaking churches. Those who helped in Sunday Schools, visited different families and invited Jordanian friends to visit them

made the most rapid progress. Some teachers said they could begin to tell where students lived by the progress they were making.

I never tried to get students to come to our school. If one wanted to know why they should study with us, I actually answered I wasn't trying to get students, but if anyone wanted me to help I would do my best to ensure that he have the opportunity to speak the language well.

No one tried to work with me to establish a school in other parts of the Arab World, but a number of schools sprang up here and there using my basic structure and books. Whether they succeed or not only time will tell. I am not in a position to evaluate that. If some didn't succeed my guess is that they were in an atmosphere where it was impossible for people to attend Arab church services to see how an Arab speaker would explain those things most important to us. Also not every country is as conducive to having friendly interchange with westerners or non-Arabs as Jordan. Finally they may have tried to have a hybrid program introducing some matters earlier than they should be introduced and thus thwarting the efficient steps toward fluency. Many organizations only allowed so much time for language learning and I wanted to get the most out of that time.

One of the things Dr. Larudee impressed on me was that the best student was one who knew nothing of Arabic ahead of time. Then with a clean slate you could lead him having preconceived ideas as to how much he knew or what he even knew in the language. In addition Dr. Larudee suggested that having a teacher who had taught in Jordanian schools would not be as good as a teacher that had never taught, because you could train that teacher in your method without having to deal with his desire to teach high school seniors the fine points of grammar. One time a family came and said they wanted their daughter to teach so she could learn English. She didn't get the job.

In spite of demonstrations, riots, civil wars and various political ups and downs, the school continued to grow. I still wake up at night thinking I should get ready to give a culture lecture or a grammar lecture. Then realize that I am here. One pastor, as he introduced us, mentioned that we had sacrificed forty-five years in Jordan. When it was my turn to speak I said my only sacrifice was in returning to live in New Jersey. My regret is that as I studied aspects of the Korean language I did not remain long enough in Jordan to complete a special pronunciation book for the Korean students. I had learned early on that a student would tend not to hear or reproduce things that didn't occur in his own language. Since Arabic has 28 consonants and only three main vowels it was difficult for Koreans who usually use only 14 consonants and ten vowels.

As a black iris the language school has continued to prosper. After I left the

school in 1999, the new director, Matthew Walter, was able to make some strides in areas that I had not had the time to deal with. He registered the school with the government and used the name Kelsey Arabic School and was able to get better facilities, enrollment in the Jordanian Social Security for the teachers and generally have a larger staff. The black iris has three prongs of the flower pointing upward and three downward. Just a little lesson to me that we are connected upward to the God we worship and downward to help those around us in need.