

The ABA/SQU Project

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In 1999 a proposal for a new kind of educational venture (for Oman) was made to the Director of SQU's Language Centre. The idea was taken up enthusiastically and ever since September that year, at the start of each semester, 16 students from SQU Language Centre join selected classes from Kindergarten to Grade 6 of the American British Academy international school in the suburb of Al Khuwair.

This project is part of a six-hour credit course consisting of a two-hour session in the classroom at SQU and a four-hour block of fieldwork at the American British Academy every week for twelve weeks. The purpose of the course is to enable students to practice and improve their language skills while being exposed to a real life English medium environment in a way that is relevant to the needs and goals of students of Education. The students benefit in many ways; they gain experience in cross-cultural communication by interacting with students and teachers who come from over sixty different countries. They also become acutely aware of just what it means to be a teacher as a result of their conversations with the participating teacher, observations and reflection on the classroom experience. In addition to these worthy pedagogical goals, they become more confident, re-evaluate skills they never valued before and do what Omani students do well, work collaboratively on presenting Omani culture to staff, parents and students of ABA.

The SQU classroom course work consists of discussions, presentations, and research projects related to the field work as well as reading, discussing and writing about experiences at the ABA. Field work at ABA consists of classroom observation, participation in classroom activities, developing a portfolio which may include information about the school, activities they did with their class, songs, CDs, videos, artwork, photographs, letters and cards from the children and staff, and a final presentation on Omani culture to students and teachers of the school. The students who participate in this project are chosen on recommendation by language Centre teachers and by a rigorous interview.

The students were required to keep a weekly journal as part of their assessed course work. The following excerpts from the journals and portfolios are representative of the students' observations, insights and illustrate their fears and feelings of apprehension, pride and joy.

Dear reader, read on

1. 'My first and sixth day at ABA were as different as the moon and the sun. For instance, while I was very nervous and anxious on the first day, I was extremely happy and excited on my fifth day.

I remember very clearly the mornings of these days. Have you ever been in the desert, when it seemed an endless way and the great camel, thirsty and anxious groped his way towards the oasis? I was like that camel before we arrived at ABA.

On the first day I ate no breakfast and stayed silent on the bus [journey to the school.] My meeting with Ms my teacher, was cold and I thought I was a terrible burden to her. When she introduced me to her students they turned a blind eye, or ignored my existence. I was a passive witness that first day.

In my fifth day I got up at 6 am, ate a light meal and was over the moon to go to the ABA. Ms greeted me with a friendly smile, talked to me about the timetable, her teaching style and her own life. The students felt comfortable and never stopped questioning me. I have been allowed to participate in many activities and help students.

Finally, I can say I have improved since I went to ABA.'

2. 'On the first day, I arrived at my class, and Mr welcomed me very much and told the children to say hello to me in Arabic'.
3. 'If you entered any classroom at ABA you will notice that the classrooms are full of stuff, such as, computers, books, maps, paintings, cushions, a mat, a sink, shelves and boxes, mathematical shapes.... The tables are organised in such a way that students can sit in groups... this helps the children to cooperate and interact with each other'
4. 'My fourth day at ABA was unusual, we went on a field trip with students from grades 5 and 4. There were some mothers there and I was very happy and I talked to the mothers. The teachers gave the mothers some roles to play.'
5. '....we were so absorbed in the story I did not hear the teacher say the time was over. Suddenly, one of the girls [in KG] came to me. She put her face in front of my face and very close to me. She said, 'The time of reading is over'. She was very serious when she was talking to me. Then I understood how those small souls cared about time'.
6. ' I did a presentation on Oman for the children of my class. I showed them some pictures of Sultan Qaboos when he was a child until now. They were surprised to see these pictures.'
7. ' They have 3 projects during the semester....now they are doing a project on rainforests and how we save trees, so we don't have to use much paper.... And that is what happened, they didn't use paper for their project..... they search the Internet smartly and look for information that connects
I noticed many of these young students can type very fast. '
8. ' I went to the library, it is very big and contents a lot of books. It also has a place to sit on the floor like an Arabian majilis...'
9. 'I gave the class a math quiz ... what is funny is that a girl said, "I can't do it" or "I don't know the answer" and after a while she relaxed and solved what seemed difficult to her. Her face looked different, at this point, of course.'
9. 'The only sad thing about this visit was that I only have one more visit and then I won't come back to the ABA.'
10. ' ...I spent the week preparing myself to fully participate at the ABA. While doing this my mind was so busy that I didn't notice how my relationship with the kids was developing. But this visit made me proud of the change I made... I am not shy anymore'
11. ' I noticed one of the girls was so quiet this time and I asked her what was wrong. She refused to talk and then she smiled and said "my tooth is broken", I didn't laugh of course. Instead I told her of my visits to the dentist when I was a child and of my love of sweets and ice-cream. She started to laugh and talk now'
12. 'The best part of today was when I took control over the class for about an hour. I had a task for them and they enjoyed it so much..... Mr ... helped me getting their attention and then they were all mine.....?'

13. 'One by one they read a story and I corrected their mistakes while Mrs ... was doing something else with the rest. This exercise gave me a feeling of importance I thought Mrs trusted me, that means that I shouldn't disappoint her and do my best.'

14. 'I told the children a story about a very famous Omani king who ruled Oman a long time ago...they loved the story... I was glad to see that I reached my goal when they asked me questions'.

15. 'I asked the teacher some questions about teaching at ABA and about the class.... How many subjects does the class have and how many hours do they have. I asked her about meeting with other teachers and how is it arranged? She said that they meet regularly. They don't meet teachers just inside Oman but other teachers outside the country. These questions were asked when the children were in the computer lab'.

16. '...the children ignored me as if I hadn't existed. I decided to bring them something...16 pretty pencils...Mrs told me to keep them until my last day there. She said, 'I'm sure you can enter the kids hearts without these pencils, you can be their friend by telling them what is good to be followed and what is bad to be avoided. You can be close to them by giving them knowledge, love, and a desire for studying as much as you can', these words I will never forget. Now I learned how patience is important. I wasn't patient at the first and I wanted the children to love me immediately.'

17. 'I told them about forts in Oman and about honey bees in Oman and how peasants keep bees. They and the teachers were very interested in these topics and they asked me a lot of questions'.

18. 'While I was sitting near Leisle, she wrote my name on my paper and then suddenly she said,' Mr P...., Aziza's name is a palindrome', he wrote it on the board and said, 'Yes it is'. At first I didn't know the meaning of palindrome. Mr Pilles explained it to me...'

19. 'My class is known as troublemakers. They don't keep silent for a moment. They always talk, fight each other and tell the teacher each other's mistakes. They always ask questions, a lot of questions. They ask anything that comes to their mind, even though it is not the right time to ask. In fact they remind me of my childhood.'

20. Omani Day

'We are going to do an Omani day to present our Omani culture and to say thank you for the staff teaching and the students at the ABA. We are extremely worried but insist on working hard so that we may be good representatives of our culture and country. For the cultural activities station, we brought some Omani traditional clothes and jewellery from different regions in Oman. We also had a henna activity which attracted the children's attention. They were very delighted and even the boys asked for henna on their hands, which should be put just for women in our culture. Girls asked me to draw flowers on their hands, but boys asked me to draw scorpions... while I'm putting henna, I had great conversation with kids...' [The henna painting and the traditional games corner drew big crowds. There was a lot of animated talk and laughter.]

21. 'The day started very early since I couldn't sleep wellI was worried about the Omani Day -everything seemed to go too well - then I saw one of the goats running away and at this moment I thought, 'I knew something horrible will happen... However, it turned out to be a funny thing. Some of the ABA students caught it while it was running though the morning assembly'.

[Nobody seemed to mind, too much, the superintendent of ABA is admirably calm, even a goat sprinting through her morning assembly didn't seem to upset her.]

22. '...they [the teachers] said to us that we taught them a lot of things about Oman and about its lovely people...'

23. '...the Omani men were dancing some wonderful dances . The teacher and the children were dancing with them and they tried to imitate the Omani way at dancing... I saw happiness on everybody's face '

24. 'Games were enjoyable to the children and the teachers. We were playing traditional games using five stones. This game requires some skills and ability to move and use your hands. They were very surprised at how we can do it.'

25. 'Before I came a part of the ABA project, I had learned many things, but mostly from books and studying. However, during this course I have learned a lot of things by dealing with people. I have known myself more than before and I realise life is not GRADES only. I have learned how to build relationships with people who are different from me with regards to culture and even in their way of looking at life.'

In conclusion, I can only say that I saw the students grow and develop more confidence and proficiency, not only linguistically, but on a personal level too. Of course this is a two-way project; we could not have proceeded without the cooperation and enthusiasm of the staff at the American British Academy. They too, benefit, as they get to meet young Omanis they may not otherwise have the opportunity to meet and they learn more about the rich culture of their host country. In addition, the staff at ABA perceives this kind of project as a way of 'paying back' their profession. The Language Centre would like to extend this project into other international schools in the area next year.