

FORUM INTERVIEW

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Catherine Lonie interviews a modest man whose career encapsulates EFL in the Arab world.

Was there a teacher from your own schooldays who made a particular impact on you?

There was no one in particular, but I think students are always able to detect who is a 'good' teacher, and we had a mix of 'good' and 'not so good'. I suppose the teachers I respected, had a more humanitarian approach to teaching rather than teachers who just knew their subject well, which was an intuitive recognition that successful teaching is essentially the interaction between people. I remember my Latin teacher, he knew everyone, had nicknames for all of us, and commented on our work in a mildly sarcastic way. He treated us as human beings, whereas some of the other teachers treated us as objects that got in the way of their lives.

Which university did you attend and what did you major in?

I've been at three universities. My first degree at London University was Arabic, Islamic History and History of the Arab World, some aspects of Islamic Law and so on. In those days, 1960 to 1963, language meant studying grammar in a decontextualised way: grammar rules and examples. I always remember a sentence we had to translate, 'the lame girl is in the red room', because it contained certain adjectives that were irregular. In the second year, without any real mastery of the language, having only had one hour a day, five days a week of language, we had to try and read 'classics' in classical Arabic, which were really difficult.

I became quite good at translating but never developed any real fluency in the language, as we didn't do any spoken Arabic at all, it was based entirely on literature. Nowadays it is much better, with a year abroad, in Cairo or other places, and an intensive twenty-five hour a week introduction to the language before you start the other academic subjects.

On my own initiative, in the summer of '62, I went to Lebanon for six weeks and that helped enormously with the language. The next university was Leeds where I did a postgraduate Diploma in teaching English in 1965-66, then I went to Lancaster in 1976-77 where I did my MA degree in Linguistics for ELT.

Why were you attracted to the study of Arabic and the Middle East?

I studied French, English and History at 'A' level, and I was very good at French and liked it. I knew I wanted to do something to do with languages, but I was also doing Scholarship level history with a speciality on the Crusades and Sir Steven Runciman's three volume history of the Crusades had recently been published. I found the whole topic fascinating: the interaction of the east and west and all these places sounded so exotic, I wanted to go and see them. I suppose that was the main factor that drew me into the study of Arabic. I went up to SOAS, knowing nothing at all about the language. I do remember buying a 'Teach yourself Arabic' book, which even now would be incomprehensible to me as it concerned itself with the 'lame girl in the red room' kind of exercises.

Where was your first job?

Well, my first job was in a bank – when I graduated in 1963, I joined the ‘Eastern Bank’ which was a small independent bank with branches all round the Gulf, Iran, India, Pakistan. My intention was that after training I would go as a manager to a bank in one of these countries. However, I decided after a year, banking was not for me. Financially, it was probably an unwise decision. I left the bank and in 1964 went off to do voluntary service in the men’s Teacher Training Centre in Ramallah, Jordan, as it then was, run by UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestinian Refugees) and had a most wonderful year. I met some tremendous people, students, fellow volunteer teachers and Palestinian teachers, who took us to their homes in refugee camps and villages, all over the West Bank, and to places of historical interest as well. Of course, Jerusalem was only a twenty-minute bus ride from Ramallah then, so I visited often, a most fascinating city.

During one of the Eid holidays, four of us young volunteers, three British lads and a Dutchman, drove to Jordan and then across the desert into Baghdad. We had ten tremendous days driving all around Iraq looking at the ancient sites, right up to Kirkuk, Arbeel, Mosul in the north, the Kurdish area, down through the holy cities of Najaf, Kufa, Karbala, through the fascinating area of the marsh Arabs, right down to Basrah and to the ruins of Ur. It was an amazing trip; I’d like to go again.

What kind of jobs did you have between the banking job and the first post in Oman?

After the West Bank, I went to Leeds to do the postgraduate Diploma and then went to Libya. I taught there for a year in a village, which was a two-hour drive from Benghazi. Conditions there were pretty primitive, there was no electricity in the village or the school, which had been converted from an old Italian army barracks into a kind of boarding school for boys who lived in the surrounding area. Some of them travelled miles and miles. It could take them two or three days to go home because there weren’t many roads, they just went across the desert. So I had another interesting year there, living in a very simple way. One compensation was that there was an old, wood-fired Italian oven in the former barracks and it baked the best bread I have ever tasted.

Libya was beautiful, the Eastern side, Cyrenaica, is very green and in spring, flowers literally carpeted the whole countryside. On one occasion, it must have been an Eid holiday, there was a traditional celebration, which I was invited to. I can remember vividly, dozens of men suddenly appearing in this green valley on horseback. The horses were bedecked in finery and the men were in their best clothes. The women had brought countless dishes and trays of food which were laid on the flower-studded grass in the meadow, I can see the whole community now, sitting down together, sharing that meal after the day’s horse-racing.

In the time I was there, I visited some of Libya’s classical Greek sites, Cyrenia in the hills and Apollonia on the coast. In fact, they are some of the best examples remaining outside Greece, and in the west, near Tripoli; I travelled to the two big Roman cities of Leptis Magna and Sabratha, with the desert in between.

Then after Libya, in 1968 I went to Bahrain, to the Teacher Training College, where I spent four years teaching English, methodology and some aspects of Linguistics to the trainee teachers, which was a very interesting phase in my career because I learned an awful lot about teaching and teacher training.

In 1972, the Qatar Ministry of Education asked me if I would go to Qatar to help set up a Language Teaching Institute, which was a government institute for teaching English to government employees. I found that a very interesting job, for it was a

matter of setting up an institute from scratch, from organising the building to writing the syllabuses and curricula, ordering textbooks, recruiting teachers and setting up an office; the whole thing – it was a big responsibility for someone who was only thirty. I was very lucky, really, to be in a position to be able to do that. I was very pleased and proud that I was able to set up something that is still going strong in Qatar.

Living in a small community you got opportunities that you would never normally get in life. For instance, I read the news on Qatar TV for two years. I also used to go to the palace to teach English to Sheikh Khalifa, the previous ruler of Qatar. I found him a very interesting man, very hard-working; he would come home from the 'office' at about seven o'clock and say he was too tired, so we would spend the time talking; he was really too busy a man to spare much time for the study of English.

We had a busy life in Qatar as I was a founder member of the Rugby club and we, Jane and I, had a folk-singing group with whom we used to sing at various venues. And then I went to Lancaster, to study!

From your experience of teaching at Lancaster, what are the main problems, linguistically and socially, faced by overseas students in UK?

Well, before I answer that question I want to say something.

Because I had set up the Language Teaching Institute, and had had so much experience, although there were far fewer EFL books published then, I felt I knew the drawbacks, the benefits, and the advantages of any English language textbook that was published. In my defence, I was young, but I thought I had all the answers. I was confident I knew how language should be taught, the best materials to use and so on...

And then I went to Lancaster, where I mixed with people from different backgrounds and with people who had a more academic approach, which made me realise I didn't know very much at all. I had an awful lot to learn and I'm still trying to catch up. Going to Lancaster was an important part of my development.

To return to your question, it is difficult to generalise because each cultural, or ethnic or linguistic group has particular problems. The clichés can be true, the Koreans can be unintelligible, the Japanese reluctant to speak, the Arab students are happy to speak but are inaccurate, and so on. One of the big advantages was that students from different language groups had to communicate with each other in English, and not just in the classroom. The impetus to learn fast was very powerful, and that is something that is difficult to recreate out of that context. One thing about studying in a British context (and presumably in an American, or Australian or any other English L1 context) was that students often knew the 'technical' vocabulary of their particular specialisation, but were floored when lecturers, or textbooks, use cultural references with which they were unfamiliar. Little things, like "...It's about the length of a cricket pitch .." , "... this thingamajig goes on the end of the little chappie here .." This kind of informal language and cultural knowledge is difficult to teach and to acquire.

What was your first impression Of Oman?

There were huge physical differences from other parts of the Gulf. One of the first things I was aware of were the mountains, the terrain was so different from Bahrain and Qatar where I'd been most recently. In other ways, things here in 1977 were obviously not as well established as they'd been in Bahrain, which has a much longer tradition of education.

One of the first things I had to do here, the memory of which is still with me, was to get the books for the schools organised. They had been stored in a big Nissen-type

hut, with a metal roof and walls, and it was August and the hut had no air conditioning. I spent three mornings in there trying to sort the books into the different categories and levels. I must have lost pounds. It was a bit of a nightmare. My first impression was, "This is a hot place!"

What did the job in Oman involve and what were the conditions like?

I was the Chief Inspector of English, so I was helping to set up an inspection system as well as working on curriculum development and the system of testing the students. So really all aspects of English Language teaching in the schools came from the English Language Unit, as it then was. It meant a lot of visits to the regions, visits within the capital area to teachers in the schools, running occasional seminars and workshops, often with a hundred or so teachers. Bringing in the inspectors from the regions to the capital for periodic meetings, using my Landrover as a delivery vehicle to take books and equipment, such as flannel boards and other 'high tech' equipment and boxes of readers. I had to do a lot of visiting, schools and teachers and the regional inspectors. We had some Omani teachers in the capital, but outside, they were mostly from other Arabic countries, Sudan, Egypt, and Jordan. Increasingly, by 1980, teachers from the sub-continent were coming in. Conditions were quite difficult, with very few metalled roads, and many of the schools were still tents or 'barastis' – made with woven date branches. But the children were keen to learn, and even in the far-flung areas they would greet you with the cry of "Hello, how are you?" One of the things I clearly remember, but unfortunately didn't take photos of, was the young children going to school on donkeys, especially along the Batinah. You would see sometimes three or four of them on one donkey, and outside the school there would be lots of donkeys tethered waiting to take the children home afterwards.

How different is Oman now from then?

In terms of buildings and development it has changed enormously, the landscape too, mountains have been knocked down to make way for roads, but the people are much the same. There is still that same genuine friendliness and hospitality. Although the buildings, the roads, the shopping malls, all these must in turn affect the way people think and live. Electricity to the villages must have affected lives, providing light, refrigeration, television, and roads that enable them to communicate with each other and other parts of the country more quickly. It is difficult for me to say what the impact on society has been, you'd have to ask the Omanis about that, but the changes in life patterns must be quite fundamental.

When was the idea of a national university first mooted?

I'm not sure when this was, and I imagine His Majesty the Sultan had some say in the matter, but in the period I was here, 1977 to 1981, the Under-Secretary of Education at the time, a wonderful, far-sighted man, called Sheikh Amer Ali Umair, who has sadly now passed away, had visions of an 'Oxford in the desert', he really wanted a high standard, English-medium university for Oman. He felt the Omanis deserved the best and it was his dream to see a quality university established. And he lived to see his dream become reality, which is good.

What changes in methods and materials have you seen during your career?

Ah, that's interesting. One thing that has changed for everyone is that because of technological advances, people's workloads are considerably greater. When I was teaching in Libya and in Bahrain, the teacher had a textbook, a blackboard and a piece of chalk and everything had to come from the textbook and the teacher's own ingenuity in devising extension activities, and practice. If you wanted the students to write something you had to put it on the board. The village I worked in, El Abiar, east of Benghazi had no electricity, but I did have a battery-driven tape recorder. I made up some little dialogues with the other teacher who was there, and I think that was the first time any of the students had experienced a tape recorder in the classroom. In fact there was an elderly British inspector who had been around for a long time who came to my classroom and he thought 'it was very interesting using a tape-recorder in the classroom!' Technology was basic, if you wanted anything extra, you had to type on a stencil, to draw on it you needed a special tool, if you made a mistake you had to paint it out and start again, so stencils were only used for exams. Any other supplementary material was on the board.

Now, teachers are expected to be typists, secretaries, material producers and test writers. Perhaps because the technology is available, we are expected to make use of it and there is a danger, I think, that the seduction of producing a beautifully prepared overhead, or nowadays, Powerpoint presentation, can often seem out of balance with the actual quality of the input. It's difficult to say if my teaching was any different in those days. I was still influenced by a 'pattern – practice', audio-lingual, substitution table, structural-based way of teaching. The idea of teaching for real communication was there but only just. One must always be aware of the baby and the bathwater syndrome, just because structural drills may not necessarily lead to language competence that doesn't mean they don't have any use or purpose at all. I still think there is a lot of value in off-the-cuff, spontaneous, mini-drills that you use with students that activates language, the thinking on their feet type of approach. I am not sure how many teachers do that kind of thing. Little things like saying to students, 'Ask him where he went last week', and then you ask, 'What did he say?'

Or get the students in pairs and each one has to choose an object they have on them, a pen, a book, an article of clothing, a mobile phone these days, and you tell one of them to 'sell' that object to the other person, and vice versa. There are a lot of basic activities you can do. The students don't need a lot of technology.

As far as textbooks are concerned, in the early days I used some books by Hornby, which was the 'Brown family at tea' syndrome, very British, very middle-class, comprised of a stay-at-home mother, a father who went to the office every day, two children, of course the cat or dog, all set in Greater London and listening to the chimes of Big Ben heralding the BBC news every night. Someone once described it as the 'Big Ben and marmalade' period of textbook writing. And then there was Alexander's tremendous breakthrough, 'First things First' and 'Practice and Progress' which were used everywhere. Each unit consisted of a little human interest story, with various transformation activities, then questions were posed and the answers built up to form a little summary of the text – quite fun to use actually. Those books were very influential. Then, the 'Functional-Notional' concept hit and a lot of books came out based on functions. They often seemed to be over-elaborate substitution type tables where you can have a range of ways of expressing a certain function, again, dialogues were often contrived to illustrate particular functions rather than them being pseudo-authentic conversations from which you extracted the bits of language you wanted to practise. I think the Functional-Notional era was a bit sterile. Then, certainly in EAP terms, you have this authenticity element and lots of books came out with authentic articles on issues like global warming, famine, and social awareness issues, mainly I suppose, because most textbook writers seem to be liberal, idealistic people with a social conscience so a lot of stuff is like that and all the

better for it. So it's a long way from Mrs Brown having tea with her family, although books like 'Headway' covered a similar range of topics. There's still a lot of Western cultural themes.

When I left Oman I went to Cyprus for four years as a Teacher Training Adviser and found that quite different. The cultural 'icons' of the youth were English football teams and people like George Michael, half Cypriot himself, and so one could use a British cultural context, pop songs, and so on, quite happily. But we also used material that was in itself 'educational' in that the pupils were learning new information and concepts through the medium of English, and that is, I think, a key to successful learning. I moved from Cyprus to Jordan in 1985, where I spent two years also as a Teacher Training Adviser, before going back to Lancaster to teach for 10 years. That was such a rich experience for me, too, being involved in a whole range of teaching, teacher training, and management courses, with students from all over the world, and the opportunity to go to different countries on various short-term visits, for conferences, to run workshops, and so on. I was lucky enough to go to India, the West Bank, Colombia, the Philippines, Paris, Japan and Korea in my time there. And then I decided to return to Oman in 1997.

What will you miss most when you leave Oman?

Well, people make places and places make places, I suppose it's a combination of the two. There is certainly something special about the physical nature of this country. Recently I did a twelve hour walk with some friends around a wadi near Tanuf and that was just spectacular, the way the colours change as the sun goes round and the huge chasm in the mountains was just so impressive – things like that I will definitely miss, and the sunshine of course.

What are you going to do with the rest of your life?

Only Allah knows what is going to happen to me. I think most people are aware of my plan to cycle home. At the moment, it is to cycle to Dubai which will take I think, four days, spend a few days in Dubai then fly (with bicycle) to Amman then cycle back to England, through Syria, Turkey, across to Athens where I will stay with my eldest son and his wife for a while, and then go to Italy and after that I'm not sure. This is something I've wanted to do for a long time and I want to raise money for charity while I'm doing this. After that I have no definite plans. The philosophy I have adopted is, I'm taking 'a delayed gap year'.

Have any players on the world stage influenced your thinking or actions in any way?

I suppose George Orwell is someone I have admired and respected as a thinker, as a Socialist, as a writer. His books, articles and letters, are to me, very influential and thought-provoking, full of humanity, really. His writing style, too, is to be admired, he goes for simplicity. There are others but Orwell's legacy is one that influenced me.

What would you have been if not a teacher?

A banker, I suppose, as that was my first job! But because I've never been dissatisfied in any of the jobs I've had, and I have had some very interesting ones, I've never thought of doing anything else. Now, teachers may be like artists – there

is a quotation from a French existentialist writer, Jean Cocteau, who said, ' A true artist has an inborn facility and an acquired difficulty', which I think is quite interesting; to be 'great', he was talking about the arts, you've got to have something within you as well as a set of techniques, a mastery of the medium. Picasso was a true artist and had definitely 'mastered the medium' being a consummate draughtsman, but some of his paintings could look as if they were just splodges and squiggles.

Perhaps teaching is like that, I have met a few, the happy few who have this inborn facility to relate to people, because I think teaching is, essentially, an aspect of human interaction, and who have this acquired repertoire of skills which complements the other. So, if you have both, it's great. If you have the in-born facility, you can probably get by, if you just have the acquired difficulty, in the sense that you have gone through a teacher training course and know techniques, you'll get by, but to have both must be nice.