Getting outside the classroom in Jordan – projects in Arabic Studies at the University of Copenhagen

Translated from Danish by John Irons

This article will take a closer look at the project as a working method and its importance for linguistic and cultural learning in connection with a study trip abroad. We have examined projects in Arabic Studies at the University of Copenhagen during the compulsory stay abroad during the fourth semester of the BA programme. A main aim of the project is for the students to 'get out and about' and make contact and carry out interviews with Arabic-speakers.

One could well ask if there is actually any need of a project where the students get out and meet Arab environments when they are living full-time in an Arabian capital. We believe that this need is very real. It enhances the learning gain both linguistically and culturally for the students if they are stimulated to become involved in planned activities in the field in the country where they are staying, over and above their official teaching (cf. Cohen & Shively 2007; Pellegrino 1998; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu 2004). The structured work on the project represents a type of activity that gives all students

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access to environments into which they otherwise would hardly have gained an equal amount of insight, and it also offers them some beneficial linguistic challenges.

Our investigation of the importance of the project has its point of departure in the process around the genesis and organisation of the student projects. With the aid of data from questionnaires and conversations, we examine the role the project plays for a cross-section of the students in the group with regard to their linguistic development, their capacity to come into contact with target-language speakers during their stay and their overall learning gain both culturally and academically.

Project work in Jordan

In spring 2016, 19 students were on a stay at the University of Jordan in Amman. Here they were to have 20 hours of teaching a week in the subjects modern Arabian literature and communicative Arabic, which included a project. There was a considerable spread in the students' starting point with regard to visits to the Arab world. A number of them had contacts in advance they could make use of, either because of their personal background or contacts made as a result of subject-related interests. These networks – spread across the group – prove to be an important resource for the students' projects. So the stay does therefore not only mean a Danish-Jordanian cultural encounter – the cultural encounter is more complex and looks different from one project to the other.

But what *is* a project exactly in this context? Briefly stated, the project consists of some small-scale fieldwork in which the students visit one or more Arabic-speakers with the aim of making an inter-view about a subject chosen by the person(s) interviewed. This is followed by a phase in which the students listen to the interview, insofar as they have a recording of it, and process it as a subject for a presentation of 20-40 minutes' duration for their fellow students and teacher (Curriculum 2010).

It is our experience that the project as a working method is something the students have no clear idea of before starting on it, and that they therefore must be instructed a number of times, with writ-ten guidelines, which divide the course of the project into various phases, and one or more oral sessions, where the students can ask more detailed questions. The working method was also new to the Jordanian language teachers. In this connection, it was important to explain that the product of the project is an oral presentation to

the group and teachers and not a written report. It was also crucial to explain that the assignment was not primarily an individual one where a mark would be given, but one where it was important that the students had to make the results of their interview and the process of analysis understandable to their fellow-students for it to be approved.

The Jordanian language teachers were extremely reluctant to accept a work concept where the students worked on their own without attending the university for the 10 days the project lasted. That would mean that the students would be absent during that period and only turn up if they needed the teachers' guidance. We therefore accepted a compromise, where the students were to turn up even though they were working on the project at the same time. The students subsequently expressed the view that turning up at the university had had a disruptive effect on their work. Despite this, all of them completed the project in all its phases: contact, interview, processing and presentation.

So that we could gain an impression of the challenges and learning gain via the project work, the students have answered a questionnaire that focuses on the actual process of the project. These data provide good insight into the background for the students' choice of subject and interviewees and into specific problems relating to the interview and processing phases.

Deciding on subject and contact

The students' choices of project topic ranged widely, as is also reflected in the total of five answers we have dealt with:

- Yazidis on the run[1] (two students)
- Unemployment in Jordan after completion of university studies (one student)
- Drawing borders in the Middle East (one student)
- The conditions for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (one student)
- Palestinian theatre in Jenin in Palestine (three students)

There was a total of eight groups, four of which were 'one-man groups', the other four comprising 2-3 students.

The students' motives for their choices of topic and interview persons shows a large spread in the answers received. Even though the students who carried out the project 'Yazidis on the run' had really decided to do a project about Syrian refugees in Jordan, the contact with the interview person was encouraged by the fact that on the

staircase where the students were living during their stay there lived many Yazidis. The project 'Unemployment in Jordan' was partially inspired by conversations with the language-partner the student had been assigned by the university. The language-partner became the interviewee, just as a fitness trainer at the fitness centre where the student trained during his stay also became an interviewee. On his own initiative, the student had also made contact with a parliamentary politician.

The project 'Drawing borders in the Middle East' diverged from the usual practice of interviewing persons face to face. The student interviewed a few persons orally, while a larger number were interviewed in writing. The student was helped to make contact with most of the interviewees via students with a Syrian and Iraqi background who were in Denmark during the period when the rest of the group were in Jordan. The students left behind were able to pass on the student's project questions to interviewees in Syria and Iraq who were the interview group the student was interested in.

The project 'Palestinian refugees in Lebanon' came about because the project phase coincided with the student's stay with his family in Lebanon. The trip to Lebanon took place after agreement had been reached with the Jordanian teachers. The interview comprised interviewees from the student's own family and their friends, and it was during the visit here that the student decided to do a project on the historical and legal conditions regarding the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The students behind the project 'Palestinian theatre in Jenin in Palestine' knew in advance that they wanted to work with Palestine. Since they had heard about The Freedom Theatre in Jenin on the West Bank and via an acquaintance had got the opportunity of making another contact with a Palestinian film-maker, they decided to examine the relation between art, politics and activism. So they made contact with The Freedom Theatre and the film-maker and travelled to Palestine to carry out their interview in Jenin and Ramallah.

In starting up a project, the students thus make contacts both in their surroundings at their place of study and via various networks, both their own and networks mediated by fellow-students. Furthermore, the examples show that the genesis of a project is a dynamic process where the students create a diversity of various types of contacts, and where a development of the cultural and knowledge-related content of the project takes place.

Interviewing and processing

One of the challenges in connection with the interview is the question of what type of Arabic is to be spoken in it. This issue is linked to the so-called diglossia problem: a duality in the language situation where one makes use of Standard Arabic in writing and more formal speech, while in everyday speech one uses an oral language that is most often described as a 'dialect'. The basic language used in teaching both in Copenhagen and Amman is Standard Arabic, but before leaving for Jordan the students have also had teaching in dialect. The students thus live with this duality, which is not all that easy to cope with when one is only in one's second year of Arabic studies. In their answers the students express that it is of importance to them if Standard Arabic or dialect is spoken.

The interview phase involved many diverse experiences for the students, and the answers show that this phase must be closely correlated with the subsequent processing phase. As a starting point, the students are requested to record their interview. The group that worked on 'Yazidis on the run', however, did not have the possibility of recording their interview, since their interviewee did not wish what he said to be recorded. The interview session was therefore a very long one – no less than four hours – and called for a high level of attention, because the students were aware of the fact that it would not be possible for them to go back and check things by listening to a recording. The subsequent processing phase was therefore not predominantly linguistic, since the notes the students had taken during the interview were all an expression of something they had already understood. The processing was typified more by checking facts, in particular dates and years, so the students could thereby make the interviewee's answers to their questions cohere.

In the project 'Unemployment in Jordan', where the interview was recorded, the student had asked the Jordanian teachers for advice about linguistically unclear passages, especially places where dialect had been spoken. The process had been linguistically rewarding, and it clearly stimulated the student's interest in the 'great talkativeness' of his interviewees, as he put it. The interviews gave the student insight into the concept of Jordanphobia, an 'in' expression among the younger section of the Jordanian population, which expresses the feeling of claustrophobia and the wish to emigrate. In addition, the student had gained some insight into a widespread client system, where in a country like Jordan one has to have one's contacts in order if one has ambitions of getting a good job.

The project 'Drawing borders in the Middle East' differs from the other ones in that the interview questions were mainly put in writing. None of the interviewees were Jordanians, which means that nothing was left to change on location as to who was going to be interviewed. The idea of drawing borders was inspired by an assignment the student had written earlier in his studies, and the written contact with the interviewees was via a fellow-student who was staying in Denmark. The student apparently made use exclusively of the Jordanian surroundings to look for linguistic guidance from the teachers. In his answer, the student expressed surprise at how difficult it is to ask the right questions in the right way, and as part of the process the student experienced that the issue of drawing border could bring the interviewee into a defensive position and provoke negative feelings which to a certain extent were projected onto this 'Western' interviewer. The student describes his linguistic gain as a good way of acquiring vocabulary within a particular field.

In the project 'Palestinian refugees in Lebanon', the student states that via this assignment his horizons were broadened, since the interview with the family members, which did not cause any linguistic problems, led to an investigation of the historical and legal conditions regarding the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The student describes the entire process as a personal success that is presumably not a direct result of a linguistic development. So it was not a linguistic motivation that had stimulated him, rather the wish to create an understanding of the background of his own personal history.

The encounters with the two interviewees in the project 'Palestinian theatre in Jenin in Palestine', where the students wanted to investigate the relation between art, politics and activism, contained linguistic surprises for the students. The man from the theatre liked to express himself clearly and distinctly in Standard Arabic (perhaps not all that strange for an actor), which made the processing phase easier. With the second interviewee, however, it proved difficult to keep the interview in Arabic, because more friendly relations were established during the process where English was used. Despite this, the student speaks of a linguistic and knowledge-related awareness of the fact that 'one cannot always have understood as much as one thought one had'. The several-stage process of analysing the interview reveals one's own misunderstandings and promotes an awareness 'that reality for people in the Palestinian world of drama is not interpreted politically in art'. The processing was a kind of total experience for the student, where there was interaction between the linguistic and content-related aspects.

Conclusion

Our examination confirms and lets the students' own words express that working with an interview-based project during a stay abroad opens up possibilities that would otherwise have called for a quite special effort on the part of the individual student. That the curriculum includes carrying out a compulsory project during the period of study creates a concrete framework for the student either individually or together with fellow-students finding interviewees and carrying out interviews that are subsequently processed. In the course of this process the student's vocabulary and linguistic competence are expanded, and the student increases his/her knowledge and gains a greater insight into culture. In addition, attention is drawn to the importance of the interview and communication form. These results, concretised and formulated via the students' answers, form a basis for continuing the project as a highly suitable method of working during an exchange stay. Insight into the students' work process provides us with knowledge of how we as teachers can support our students and our partners with guidance as to how the project can be implemented.

Apart from the direct gains regarding the development of linguistic and cultural competence, the project gave the students an impression of the fact that the concept of learning at the University of Jordan differs in certain respects from the one they have met with in Copenhagen. At the same time, the students experienced that with the aid of compromises it was possible to find a model that enabled things to function. In that way, the project was also a catalyst for a cultural encounter with methods of teaching and studying at the place of study.

Notes

1. The Yazidis are often defined as an ethno-religious community that live in northern Iraq, particularly around the city of Mosul. In their religious teaching there are features shared with both Islam and Christianity, but their interpretation of the angels has led to misunderstandings and persecution and attempts to eradicate them on several occasions down through history. Most recently, the Islamic State, after the take-over of Mosul, has persecuted, mistreated and killed many Yazidis, which has led to many of them fleeing from the area. It was some of these refugees that our student met in Jordan.

Literature

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