



## Research Article

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## Oral History: An Unpredictably Effective Strategy for Teaching ESL to Saudi Arabian Students

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### Abstract

For more than thirty years, collecting oral histories has been recognized as an effective teaching strategy in the West. Although it is rare in Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) countries, the authors adopted it to bridge knowledge gaps they observed in their Saudi Arabian students. The reclamation of familial stories and tribal information using oral history methodologies reconnected students to their past while facilitating a unique learning experience. This paper describes how an oral history project was created for undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia to help them move beyond the hard science approach supported in the Arabian world to one that embraces a narrative based methodology. Historically, oral histories – an important pillar of Arabian society - were used to transfer significant tribal information, customs, traditions and stories from one generation to the next. Since the discovery of oil, the kingdom has undergone dramatic societal and lifestyle transformations resulting in the loss of some traditions, namely oral history. Consequently, younger generations know very little about their Arabian heritage. The fundamental goal for this project was to improve the students' comprehension of humanities and social science courses by reconnecting them to their past using oral history methods.

**Keywords:** Oral History, Saudi Arabia, Higher Education, Arab Tradition, Teaching Methods

### 1. Introduction

Teaching at a university in the Arab world is a unique experience. It provides expatriate educators with the unique opportunity to be submerged in a rich and dynamic culture that differs in countless ways from their own. But beyond the charm and intrigue, the experience also offers a host of unanticipated complexities that can challenge even the most experienced instructor.

It is assumed, and one could even say *expected*, that any student entering into a university degree program has achieved the minimal foundational skills to build upon in their quest to fulfill their degree requirements. The authors discovered that this was often not the case while teaching in the Sultanate of Oman, China, and more recently at an English medium university in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In fact, they quickly learned that a large percentage of their students, regardless of country, lacked the basic skills required to meet the challenges of a mainstream western university curriculum. It was observed that many students had a limited understanding of the English language despite the best efforts of their foundational and/or preparatory programs and their instructors. To complicate this further, it was revealed that the students' knowledge of Social Studies was

exceptionally weak. The students were not prepared for an education that included humanities and social science courses as degree requirements.

## 2. Background

Within the Arab world, the hard sciences are highly regarded and sought after.

Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Engineering, in particular, are respected more so than Psychology, Anthropology, or History (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). They constitute the majority of degree programs in universities and colleges whereby students' foundational knowledge in other areas tends to be less of a priority hence less developed. This ideology is pervasive in the majority of institutions of higher learning and has contributed to gaps in knowledge required for students to move forward in their studies. Students are less interested in the humanities and social science majors as career options and/or unable to attain a degree in them because very few are offered in the Arabian world.

This was especially the case for the two instructors while teaching at a Saudi Arabian university. They discovered that courses in their department, Core Humanities & Social Sciences (H & SS), were especially problematic for the majority of their female students. Courses such as World Civilizations, World Regional Geography and Leadership & Teamwork, for example, caused unexpected difficulties for a large percentage of their female pupils. The instructors' "assumption" that their students had the basic knowledge and skills to move forward was quickly questioned. They also learned that few of their female students knew about their own Arabian past outside of their religious and Arabic language studies. Surprisingly, there was a measurable alienation from local, national and regional history including familial knowledge.

As educators hired to follow an assigned curriculum, their task became complicated. How can one be an effective instructor when students do not have the basic skills for their growth and development? How can one successfully teach humanities and social science courses to students who do not understand the world outside of their own culture? Lacking the foundational skills, how were these students ever going to pass these courses? How were they going to become competitive in a global economy? The instructors had no choice but to make the necessary adjustments and adaptations to facilitate enhanced learning to those students who were experiencing educational gaps while maintaining the integrity of the university curriculum and fulfilling their contractual obligations.

In the fall of 2014, the instructors embarked on a joint initiative. Drawing from their respective areas of expertise they blended anthropological theory and methods with those of history. They developed a new assignment, "The Oral History Project," to foster enhanced learning through familiar ideologies and materials amid a less stressful and intimidating environment. The primary objective was for each student to learn about their familial past and culture to help them bridge their humanities and social sciences gap. The orientation focused less on memorization and non-critical thinking to one that promoted self-discovery, personal awareness and local, regional and national cultural/historical exploration.

While adhering to the university's syllabi so as to not circumvent the required Course Learning Objectives (CLOs), the new project promoted a unique learning strategy based on what was considered to be an accepted Arabian tradition. Collecting oral histories was meant to increase the students' understanding of the Middle East in general and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) more specifically while preparing students for the global marketplace. What was not anticipated was how effective the project would be in helping students improve other skills.

This paper will explore how an oral history project was developed to help students improve their knowledge of humanities and social science courses. The primary focus is not so much on the project, but how the initiative contributed in unanticipated ways to an unexpected outcome. It showcases how the innocent and benign incorporation of an Arabian tradition into three university elective courses inadvertently facilitated the growth and development of students' English language

skills while enhancing their general knowledge of their family's past. The discussion will begin with a review of the university, local Saudi Arabian culture, Arabian oral history, and difficulties of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in Saudi Arabia. The paper will then highlight The Oral History Project followed by a discussion showcasing the unexpected results.

The university is located in an affluent region of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The students are of various ages and, in general, come from families that are financially well off as is evident by their ability to pay the tuition fees. It is a respected, private institution of higher learning that offers both bachelor and master's degree programs taught primarily in English. As is the case in most Saudi Arabian private and public universities, it is segregated having both male and female campuses (Jamjoon & Kelly, 2013). The curriculums are virtually identical for both genders with some differences based on Saudi Arabian rules and regulations. Male instructors teach male students, while the female student body may have either a male or a female teacher.

Since its inception twelve years ago, the university has followed a Texan model of education that provides a two-year Preparatory Program and a mandatory Core Curriculum Program as foundational to all degree majors. Some students enter the university after graduating from Saudi government high schools. The Saudi Arabian public school system uses Arabic as its medium of instruction and adheres to a Saudi curriculum. Many of these students have an acceptable command of the English language and of the hard sciences. A smaller proportion of the students come from international high schools in the kingdom where the curriculums are based on western ideologies and are taught primarily by native-English speakers. Then there are those who have studied abroad most often because their parents work and/or go to university overseas and/or their affluence has facilitated international travel both inside and outside the GCC. Both instructors observed that students from private schools within the country or with an exposure to language teaching abroad had better language skills than graduates from the Saudi public high schools. In general, these students benefited from these experiences and were better prepared for the transition into higher education.

The most common method of registration is direct entry into the university's Preparatory Program. It focuses on providing foundational knowledge for incoming students to succeed in their chosen major. It offers instruction in language acquisition, mathematics, and study and computer skills. After passing, students automatically enter into the Core Curriculum, which consists of two distinct programs of study - Mathematics & Natural Sciences and Humanities and Social Sciences. They also begin introductory courses in their major.

All degree programs include a core of academic subjects in the areas of English communication, mathematics, laboratory science, behavioural science and social studies. They all support defined competencies as per the Texan model. There are two divisions within the Core Curriculum - Undergraduate and University. Each one offers an array of courses designed to meet the requirements of individual degree programs. The University Core Curriculum consists of four courses in written, oral and professional communication, as well as three courses including Arabic Language, Islamic Studies and Physical Education. Students are also required to take courses from the Assessment Capstone Series.

Textbook selection is based on the Texas curriculum. This has generated a host of issues for both faculty members and their students. Firstly, the textbooks are written in academic English and were designed for American university students. As Omedo (1993) suggests, they are often not suitable for second language learners, even if they have a good command of the English language. They are too sophisticated for the average Saudi Arabian female student resulting in a large percentage of the student body ignoring assigned readings. By the end of the semester, many students have not picked up their textbooks or have left them in their original packaging. The cost of textbooks is automatically included in the students' tuition fees. Secondly, the textbooks deal with concepts that are alien to second language English speakers and use examples that are meant for western audiences. For example, the notion of diverging discourses in History and Geography where academics have opposing points of views about events and their impact on human development is

something most of the Saudi students are not accustomed to. It is difficult for the instructors to build upon baseline theories when the foundation has not been laid and critical thinking skills are imperative and introductory information is essential. The third issue pertains to the content, which is often from an American viewpoint. Americentrism focuses exclusively on American ideologies, history and theories over others. Examples such as abortion, drug and alcohol abuse, and dating do not support local traditions and customs and are considered controversial in the Islamic world. Arabs also view questions about the conflict between Palestine and Israel as incendiary. Political and economic responses can be very different from those of westerners. Geography suffers from the same complexities that support diversity in opinion and ideologies such as the Big Bang Theory, the origins of the earth and its *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Fourthly, the opposite is true whereby regional context is not included and often omitted from the western textbooks. They lack cultural intelligence. Outside of Arabic Language and Islamic Studies courses, Arabian examples are only prioritized if the instructor chooses to focus on localized issues.

### 3. Oral History: An Arabian Tradition

Arabian history is unambiguously diverse and complex. For millennia, the people who called the Arabian Peninsula home, Arabs, shared many traditions and customs, but differed from region to region, tribe to tribe, and family to family. Historically they lived a sedentary or nomadic existence and at times a combination of both. "Sedentary dwellers resided primarily in villages and towns, often associated with oases, wells or other permanent sources of water, and made their living in agriculture, craftwork and trade" (Wynbrandt 2010, p. 15). Nomadic populations were primarily livestock breeders raising sheep, goats and camels. They conducted annual migrations in search of natural browse and water to sustain their large herds. Some groups practiced a combination of both with sedentary living and pastoral nomadism as their chosen livelihood strategy.

Today traditional ways are succumbing to the enticement of modernity. In particular, newer modes of communication are increasingly replacing one-on-one interactions. Technology has become the main source of information and communication usurping established customs. This is especially the case where literacy was historically uncommon and the method for transmitting important information including familial or tribal legacies was oral. But of late, Arabia is abandoning these practices for the convenience of cell phones and the Internet (Winder, 2014). Texting, emailing, Twitter, Facebook, and other methods of social media are growing in popularity lifting the veil on once taboo practices amid guarded societies.

The historical method of communicating important information in the Arab world was by *oral history*. In lieu of a written history, oral histories were a mechanism used by complex societies and smaller social units to pass on significant knowledge from one generation to the next to safeguard traditions, customs and knowledge deemed worthy of safeguarding. It was a tried and true practice. Groups, families and individuals focused on the preservation of dates and historical events in their retelling of stories, songs and even poetry. The transference of cultural nuances was the glue that bonded families and tribes through shared knowledge and experiences. It remains an important Arabian tradition to this day, but on a much smaller scale.

It is important to note that many oral history scholars associate *folklore* with oral history. Reynolds (2007) suggests that it mirrors oral history in many ways, "It is usually oral, and often a local, phenomenon, and it is nearly always created and performed in one of the colloquial dialects" (p. 18). It solidified familial connections and identity over time. "The Arab culture is permeated and held together in many different ways by its folklore" (Reynolds, 2007, p. 26).

Today oral histories or folklore are not only for tribesmen and women, the illiterate and the historical. Although they are diminishing in their local usage, they have come to serve as an important tool in academia for gaining firsthand knowledge while conducting research. Anthropologists and historians, in particular, have used oral histories for decades as a tool for investigation and data collection whereby first-person accounts broaden the scope of an inquiry as

they cast a spotlight on a personal or lived experience providing nuanced understandings of lifeways and events both past and present. Maynes, Pierce & Laslett (2008) suggest that when “eliciting facts about people’s lives they get answers that are shaped in terms of the cultural conventions of storytelling, often reflecting the sharing, telling, and retelling of self-narratives in many settings and over a lifetime” (p. 72). In this sense, as also noted by Reynolds (2007), oral histories and folklore provide a personalized accounting of lived experiences:

*Folklore is the songs we sing without reference to printed music, the bedtime stories we tell our children without reading from a book, the family histories or experiences we recount at the dinner table over and over through the years, the jokes we hear and passion at work...In short, folklore is all of the many different ways we express who we are as members of a particular group, a family, an ethnic group, a fraternity, a religious community, and so on, but which we have learned directly from other people rather than from books, televisions, or movies. One way of conceiving of and defining folklore is to think of it as the multitude of artistic forms of communication that we learn directly from other people and then perform and transmit repeatedly over time. (p. 25-26).*

The collection of folklores and/or oral histories thereby adds the breadth and depth that is required for a thorough analysis. They reach beyond the conventions of quantitative methodologies, but cannot, as highlighted by Alessandro Portelli (2013), “...be reduced to any single meaning...” (p. 284).

The collecting of oral histories has also been used as a teaching strategy. Clary-Lemon & Williams (2012) stated, “Since the 1950s, oral history has been recognized for its strong teaching approach” (p. 6). Within ESL, oral history methodologies, according to Montero & Rossi (2012), have been used for developing language skills in general and writing skills in particular. Olmedo (1993) argues that oral history approaches help teachers and students in the ESL classroom to see viewpoints from multiple cultural perspectives. They focus on the collection of personal narratives that have been proven to be very successful. Maynes, Pierce & Laslett (2008) suggest that, “Personal narrative analysis produces a different type of knowledge than do many other approaches to social sciences and history” (p. 126).

#### 4. Research Design

The germination of an assignment that focused on the collection of familial oral histories was an accidental response to an unanticipated situation and set of circumstances. Both instructors were struck by how little their students knew about Social Studies and the Arab world. They routinely discussed these deficiencies with one another contemplating various remedial strategies to bypass the gaps in the students’ knowledge of Arabian culture, history and genealogy.

This unfamiliarity was surprising in light of what was understood by the anthropologist and historian about Arabian culture prior to working in Saudi Arabia. According to the authors, they had assumed that oral history was a method for transferring knowledge from generation to generation and that it was a well-established Arabian tradition - but this was not the case. The majority of their students lacked information about their own past. They were not as connected to their ancestors as witnessed elsewhere in the Sultanate of Oman and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Without a sound foundation to build upon, the teaching process was impeded and certainly the students’ abilities to achieve their degree requirements were questionable. How then were the instructors going to overcome this knowledge gap? How could they proceed with so many students lacking foundational information? How could they achieve their CLOs? Over the course of their first working semester, the instructors eventually agreed to offer a blanket assignment to students enrolled in three elective Core courses.

The Oral History Project assignment also allowed for ease of adaptation. It was a comfortable fit for the objectives of the three Core Undergraduate courses -World Regional Geography, World Civilization and Leadership & Teamwork. The objective was for each student to collect “local

knowledge” as conveyed by his or her family members. This would enhance the students’ local, regional and national knowledge of the Arabian Peninsula and their family’s role in its development past and present. For the students who came from non-Arabian countries, the exercise focused on their family’s experiences within their country of origin in addition to their journey to Saudi Arabia, and their experiences as expatriates in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. By virtue of adhering to the assigned rubric, each student was guaranteed a unique learning experience that would include inquiries into familial roots.

The course CLOs provided the overarching template for the assignment. For example, in the case of Geography they helped to expose historical human-environmental interactions and how these relationships have changed over a continuum. Students in World Civilizations gathered nuanced information about families in the past. The Leadership & Teamwork course focused on the collection of familial leadership styles belonging to ancestors, grandparents, as well as mothers and fathers to understand their impact upon the student’s leadership style. It was assumed that different generations would highlight transformations from various perspectives showing change over time. Suggested subtopics for all courses included work and business, former jobs, relationships with the land, familial movements, education and mobility, family and traditions, life before and after Saudi Aramco, and women and society.

The assignment consisted of five sequential steps – acquisition, transcription, translation, reflection and presentation. The steps were designed to foster the growth and development of the humanities and social science perspectives through key-informant interviews or firsthand accounts. The students followed the syllabus, the instructor’s directions and the university’s code of conduct. Respectable approaches were prioritized during all phases of investigation. “Oral history is not just about studying people; it is also about valuing them, according to Sheftel & Zembryzycki (2013), this makes our work difficult and emotionally demanding, but it is the only way that we can try to truly understand people’s lives” (p. 16). Students conducted themselves according to established protocols while practicing ethical and accepted standards. They had to navigate cultural norms and established restrictions such as those faced by women in the kingdom.

The first stage or acquisition phase focused on the selection and coordination of qualified participants for scheduled interviews to collect stories and memories. Each student was responsible for conducting two to five separate interviews. In this way, there would be multiple perspectives to draw from when creating an overview of the past. According to Sheftel & Zembryzycki (2013), “Oral history is grounded in the relationship between the interviewee and interviewer—without both, there is no oral history. Furthermore, the quality of this relationship, the nature of the interviewee-interviewer interaction, has a determinative effect on the interview itself” (p. xxi). This perspective supported focussing on familial narratives not because they would offer superior results for the students, but because they would provide a more comfortable first-time experience for the novice interviewers. It was imperative that the selected participants were family members and were older than the students and were willing to share their stories. This meant that fathers, mothers and relatives once removed such as aunts and uncles were primary candidates. Grandparents were viewed as key informants because they could provide reflections on ancestral generations and insight into historical perspectives. Combined, all would provide a broader range for the investigation.

The students were required to compile a list of interview questions that could be divided into two subcategories. The first category focused on general information questions that were to be asked of all interviewees. They were designed to elicit background information such as the participant’s name, tribe, age, marital status, children, gender, and other case specific questions. The second category allowed for greater freedom whereby the interviewer was not chained to prescribed questions that limited the scope of the interview. Students could formulate their questions based on context specific queries using the interviewer’s knowledge of the situation and the discussion at hand, course topics and subtopics, and textbook themes. The goal was to allow for flexibility while maintaining basic topics for inquiry.

It was mandatory for the students to record all of their interviews. This served three purposes: 1.



to provide evidence that they had completed original work, 2. that they had received approval from their informant to record the conversation, and 3. they had verbatim responses that could be transcribed, translated and analyzed at a later date. Students were also instructed to take notes during their sessions to capture the nuances of the interview process. As Sheftel & Zembryzcki (2013) suggest, what happens “off the record” in our projects is just as important “because these encounters help us understand the humanity of interviewers, interviewees, and the process itself” (p. 16).

After the interview phase, the recordings were transcribed either in totality or partially, as per their instructor’s directions. As first-time folklore researchers, the transcription of a two to five page document in multiple languages was beyond the scope of the assignment and the students’ abilities. The university demographic is primarily Saudi Arabian, but there were many expatriate students whose parents’ worked in the kingdom. During the interviews, some relatives communicated in their native tongue – Arabic, Urdu, and Hindi. The students had to transcribe these interviews from non-English recordings to written text. English responses made the transcription task less daunting for the students. Once all of the interviews had been transcribed and translated, the next phase was for the student to reflect and analyze their findings and present them in an abbreviated written report. The students were asked to consider how their family members and their familial ideologies have influenced how they are navigating their world, how they lead, how they interact with the environment, and how they use past events to inform their worldviews. Most importantly, the exercise exposed personal narratives about, for example, in Leadership & Teamwork how family members worked in the past, contemporary changes, and “local knowledge” including personal memories, past lifeways, and cultural and physical transformations. The final analysis was presented as a PowerPoint presentation or a video with an English voice over.

The assignment was meant to accomplish yet another goal. The intention was to introduce the students to qualitative research methodologies and to show them how they work in situ. One-on-one interviews based on open-ended questions facilitated this investigative style.

Faced with the realization that hard science courses and quantitative research are preferred in the Arab world, collecting oral histories offered a unique opportunity to introduce an alternative source of data collection that reached beyond numbers, formulas, and calculations. The lesser-known and practiced qualitative research provided a more all-encompassing or holistic research perspective to tease out the “grey areas” such as memories, intangible evidence, explanations, and personal interpretations of humanity as very seldom presented in mathematical equations.

At no point did the instructors consider the assignment to be an exercise in English skill enhancement. It was strictly designed as a social science experiment to engage the students in their own culture and familial awareness. Developing the students’ English skills was an accidental by-product that added value to the activity. Interestingly, and most surprisingly, each of the five stages inadvertently helped to accomplish this goal.

## 5. Discussion and Findings

Collecting oral histories is an interesting, enlightening and delicate academic line of inquiry. The benefits of an oral history move beyond the constraints of generalized history books, databases, and contemporary interpretations. By conducting interviews with people who have firsthand experience and knowledge, access to lesser-known, personal and family-oriented information is exposed while providing a broader understanding of culture, history, and historical discourses (Perks & Thomson, 2003; Clary-Lemon & Williams, 2012).

The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education is aware of the deficiencies associated with teaching ESL in the kingdom (Al Sheikh, 2015). They are mindful that many of their students entering university struggle to communicate in English at an acceptable level that facilitates success in an English medium university. Several studies have provided numerous explanations for this within the kingdom. Al Nasser (2015) stated that after numerous initiatives and programs established over the past two decades to improve English learning and the establishment of many private universities and

schools, the results have not been satisfactory. Research findings suggest that there is a lack of teacher training, outmoded teaching approaches, textbooks and curricula as some of the main issues when teaching ESL in the kingdom (Khan 2011; Khan, Khan & Ahmad, 2015; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Mahboob & Elyas (2014) have identified improper teacher training as one of the reasons for this situation. They suggest that Saudi Arabian English teachers often lack basic English skills and have not been trained in language teaching methodologies (ibid., 2014). Furthermore, in public schools English as a compulsory subject starts after grade four whereas private schools generally start teaching ESL in the first grade (Al Nasser, 2015). Another reason, as suggested by Swain (1988), is that “content teaching cannot just be used as a surrogate for ESL teaching. It needs certain efforts, planning, and the modification of material to ensure that content teaching is meeting the standards and instruments of TESOL teaching” (p. 68). It will not automatically enhance second language learning. Second language speakers tend to use selective listening to follow the class. “In many cases, we do not utilize syntax in understanding we often get the message with a combination of vocabulary, or lexical information plus extra-linguistic information” (ibid., p. 72). This extreme range of diversity upsets the flow of the classroom and contributes to less prepared students falling even further behind their classmates.

Another area of weakness pertains to Saudi Arabian students having insufficient classroom time for the effective production of their language skills. In order for students to produce language in its full functional way, we have to give the students the opportunity to be more engaged than in the limited time and opportunities a classroom provides (Swain, 1988). In the typical content class, Swain (1988) argues,

*with student talk and writing being as restricted as it is, students do not have to work at getting their meaning across accurately, coherently and appropriately. They are motivated to create their intended meaning precisely which involves grammatical accuracy, coherent discourse, and appropriate register. (p. 77).*

This also applies to exposure outside of the classroom. Real life situations provide firsthand opportunities to develop a newly acquired language. Cultural restraints may prohibit Saudi students, especially females, from engaging in conversations with non-Saudis. This could inadvertently limit their desire to seek out other learning sources such as English books, movies or even videos. Frustration and a lack of confidence may ensue impeding ESL skill building. To compensate for these gaps, public and private universities in the kingdom developed introductory ESL programs to support their degree programs (Al-Dali, Fnais, & Newbould, 2013).

Collecting empirical evidence was the primary goal for the Oral History assignment. Oral life histories and interviews, according to Maynes, Pierce & Laslett (2008), are the predominant forms of personal narrative evidence employed in social science research and among historians who use personal narrative as evidence” (p. 72). As they noted, “For some researchers, the goal of personal narrative analysis has simply been to work from an empirical base that is more inclusive” (ibid., p. 1). This perspective, albeit time consuming, was demonstrated in practice by the students. The virtues of a more inclusive approach reached beyond the expediency of surveys and questionnaires to achieve a more intimate analysis of the research participant and their contribution to the investigation.

In pursuing the multiple personal narratives, the students focused on all five phases of the assignment - acquisition, transliteration, translation, reflection, and presentation. The first phase pertained to the actual acquisition process. “As alert oral historians and ethnographers have noted, oral forms of self-narrative follow their own particular logics, conventions, and rhythms that, once noticed, can serve as a guide to interpretation” (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, p. 72). This included selecting participants, scheduling interviews, providing foundational information, and recording the sessions. Each student provided the necessary instructions so that their participants knew what to do, translated their questions and answers into native languages, and listened to the participant’s responses. The interviewer did not have a choice regarding the choice of interview language. They



proceeded in the key-informant's language and dialect of choice. Some of the interview sessions lasted for more than an hour with considerable attention being paid to asking the appropriate questions and ensuring that the answers were understood, and that they were recorded in their entirety.

After recording the personal narratives, the next stage was either transcription or translation. If English was the chosen language, then transcription occurred next because there would have been no need for translation. If other languages were used, translation was prioritized either before or in conjunction with the actual transcription.

During the transcription phase, precision and accuracy were emphasized. Students had to listen intently to their participant's responses so as to not miss any words or misconstrue the original meaning or context when transcribing from audio recordings into written text. This was painstakingly difficult, as it required starting, stopping and even rewinding the recordings to ensure that verbatim transcriptions occurred. Without this attention to detail, there was a high probability that the context of the participant's original responses would be lost or misrepresented. Punctuation, sentence structure, and grammar were highly regarded during this phase.

In some cases, the students used other methods for transcribing their results. Oral history interviews of today do not need to be transcribed manually, but rather by using voice recognition software (Schaffer & Snyder, 2015). The use of technology limited the students' ESL experience. The choice was theirs and the results were indicative of their decision.

The translation phase is often the most difficult and laborious stage of the oral history process, especially when English is the student's second language. In most cases, translation was necessary because the interviewee did not speak English. Shifting from native languages to English is not an easy process and requires one to be focused and knowledgeable in both languages. In the case of interviews conducted in Arabic, Urdu and Hindi, every non-English word would have been listened to and an English version was provided. Depending upon the students' level, this could be an extremely complex and painful process. Less-developed speakers would have resorted to a dictionary more frequently than those who spoke English with greater ease. The translation of the responses, ideologies, and historical experiences accentuated the students' focus on the clarification of the answers, original context, and historical implications.

Reflection was an important aspect of the assignment because it required critical thinking skills and personal contemplation. Students had to focus on how family members' stories resonated with their personal narrative. Language and culture are inextricably connected. As Reynolds (2007) posits in the case of the Arabic language, "No single element of Arab identity is more important than the Arabic language: It is, quite simply, the glue that holds Arab culture together" (p. 18). The same can be said for all languages and of course those used by the family members of non-Arabic speaking students. Within language are clues about the respondent's identity and their worldviews. As stated by Reynolds (2007), "Much of the folklore an individual experiences in his or her daily life is found not in specific artistic fashionings (stories, songs, paintings, perfumes, etc.), but in the customs, traditions and beliefs of their community" (p. 182). The juxtaposition of historic and contemporary cultural mainstays slowly unravelled during the interviews casting light on significant changes, modifications and eradications for the family and the society as a whole. Deconstructing these differences helped the students explain how the exercise impacted them personally, their role in responding to the analyses, and how their reflections supported the objectives of the project and their course.

The final aspect of the assignment was the presentation of the student's work at the end of the semester. Each student was required to provide a written overview of their recordings, highlighting what they deemed to be of greatest importance. This included the collating of the various elements into an orderly manner and then presenting the critical aspects to their fellow students. They had two options for delivery – to create a five to ten-minute video with a voice over or to showcase their research in a PowerPoint presentation. Videos were easily created using software available to the students. PowerPoint presentations are now commonplace for the students. In both regards, the

students relied on their cultural intelligence and discretion when deciding what and what not to include. Most of the students refrained from including photographs, past or present, of any female relative due to the cultural taboo associated with sharing these images publicly.

This project achieved far more than the instructors' initial expectations. The outcomes were four-fold – one expected and three unanticipated. The primary goal for The Oral History Project was for the students to bridge the gap in their humanities and social science knowledge. By virtue of their participation, this outcome was successfully achieved. This simple exercise provided the students with insight into their family's journey while supporting an historical and cultural accounting of the past. They conducted qualitative research methods and executed humanities and social science analyses.

The second and more uplifting result was how the project resonated with the students on a personal level. Many of the young women reported how little they knew about their family prior to this exercise. They claimed to be delighted at the opportunity to engage in these types of discussions with their family members and to learn about their history, their ancestors, and their tribes. Many indicated that they did not understand how dramatically their country, city and family have changed over time. This outcome supports the work of Alessandro Portelli (2013) who stated that, "The way I went into those homes defined how I walked out of them. I feel that unless one comes out of an interview changed from the way he entered it, one has been wasting time" (p. 284).

The next unexpected outcome related to how the family members responded. The students revealed that their relatives were extremely eager to participate and to share their stories with them. It was with pride and admiration that they educated their young family member. Grandparents in particular responded with great enthusiasm highlighting major changes from their youth to the lives they now live. Elderly family members remembered the hard times, the times long before Saudi Aramco. This finding supported the works of Kouritzin (2010) and Royles (2016) who stated that many of the published oral history projects have had a lasting impact on the communities where they were conducted and on the students who were involved.

Unbeknownst to the instructors was how their new assignment supported students producing language for real audiences and a specific purpose. Enhanced English language acquisition was an unforeseen outcome that was never articulated by either educator. The advantage of oral history approaches for ESL learners, according to Kourizina (2010), is that the students can produce their own material.

*In many TESOL classes the learning of content and the learning of English are the program goals and are supposed to go hand in hand. By collecting stories from family members or people from their own community, students can relate to the material they collected while creating narratives about the exploration of their own culture and history. (ibid.).*

By simply revisiting traditional Arabian methods of communication, the students inadvertently developed their English listening, reading, and writing skills. During each phase they had to practice these skills to better understand the data and to communicate their findings. All were put to the test and their enhancement was an obvious outcome due to practice.

The last unanticipated result was how it affected the instructors. According to Alessandro Portelli (2013),

*Good oral history has a purpose, even a mission. It aims to make a mark in the world. It does not end with the turning off of the recorder, with the archiving of the document, or with the writing of the book...". (p. 284).*

After collecting the oral histories for over two years, the authors have amassed a large assemblage of material that they would like to showcase as an example of their students' extraordinary achievements. They anticipate placing the information into a wider historical, cultural, and international context to help break down racial barriers, misconceptions, and prejudices about

Saudi Arabia and Saudi women more specifically. Their project could also be offered as a model for other Saudi Arabian high schools, Core curriculums, and university preparatory programs to create new strategies for learning English. This would automatically establish the humanities and social sciences as essential knowledge for future generations.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper investigated an Oral History project started at a private university in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The impetus came from the authors' escalating awareness that their students had very little understanding of the humanities and social sciences, in particular their respective courses, and their own family's history. Personal narratives were sought through the collection of oral histories from Arabia, India, and Pakistan. The collection of information was based on each student's familial past focusing specifically on their interviewee's memories, stories, and shared knowledge about their natal family, tribe, former lifeways, and traditions. The students analyzed their findings and presented them highlighting their personal reflections.

There were unexpected outcomes to this exercise. It was anticipated that the students would gain a greater understanding of their family, country, and the Arabian world in addition to developing their knowledge of qualitative research methods, but what was not expected was how this exercise would impact their lives and those of their participants. Most surprisingly was how the project contributed to the development of the students' English language skills. During every stage, English was utilized, and the repetition resulted in the advancement of the students' skills thereby enhancing their ability to successfully pursue their degree requirements.

It was an individual project that when amassed will form a larger Saudi Arabian representation. The collation of oral histories will fundamentally contribute to a greater discourse that is attempting to break down established boundaries and stereotypes while promoting the intrinsic value and need for the humanities and social sciences in the Arabian world.

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