

Teaching EFL in the Sultanate of Oman

By Barbara Stasiuk, Canada

An ESL teacher goes EFL in Salalah, Oman

In mid-December 2021, I embarked on a new odyssey—teaching EFL in a Foundations Program at Dhofar University in Salalah, Oman. The location is described as bucolic as it is cradled between the coast of the Arabian Sea and the Dhofar Mountains, and the weather is usually sunny and warm except for the unique Khareef (fall) season when the monsoon-like weather turns the desert into a verdant green with a constant cloudy drizzle. Coconuts, papayas, and bananas abound here and recently desert farming is expanding the Dhofar region’s agricultural products, which have been heavily based upon camels, cattle, and goats.

Since the EAP market shrunk suddenly in Canada during the pandemic, I thought it important to keep working in an academic job even though I was apprehensive about working abroad. However, several things drew me to Oman: I wanted to improve my Arabic, one of my TESL professors from Seneca College was here, many people told me it was a friendly place, and it is not a commercialized part of the Gulf region, or The Khaleej, in Arabic جيل خال. Salalah itself offers so many great nature adventures, like hiking in the wadis and waterfalls, snorkeling, and camping on the beach. Having raised my family while I was completing my post-secondary education, this was my first chance to live and work abroad. Many people had raved about Oman because of its reputation as a safe place with friendly people, coupled with its charming connection to ancient ways, such as, only having low rise buildings throughout The Sultanate.

Adjusting to life away from home

I felt a lot of my experiences here could be summed up as, it has been the best of times and the worst of times because it is wildly exciting to be able to live in an entirely different part of the world, with a distinct culture such as Salalah, yet missing my loved ones while trying to figure out how I can fit in as an expat has been discombobulating at times. Learning about Salalah ways has been so intriguing because many of my students speak Jebali or Mehri (ancient languages that pre-date Arabic) as a mother tongue and learned Arabic when they started school and the influences of African and Indian cultures, to name a few, on this part of the Arabian Peninsula. One Jebali tour guide explained to me how the cows are sent out



in the morning with the farmer appointing a leader cow for the herd; this closeness to animals reminded me of indigenous ways of knowing in Canada. The homosocial expectations of a Muslim culture were not unknown to me, having raised a Muslim family in the Toronto diaspora, yet it was hard to navigate the workplace where so many colleagues from so many cultures have different points of view. For example, is it acceptable to go to a male colleague's office to chat, or not? Often looks here communicate more than words, but it is hard to gauge exactly what a look means to an outsider.

Classroom management

We use the *Cambridge Textbook Unlock*, and it has been created with Gulf Culture in mind, so it is culturally sensitive. When I arrived in 2021, the program was transitioning from the flipped classroom approach to teaching more in the classroom and getting the students to interact in groups; many students never adjusted to online classes due to many factors: Some live in the mountains where internet is unreliable, a lack of digital literacy prior to the pandemic, and a generally agreed upon fact—the culture of Salalah is quite collectivistic so working alone online suits some but certainly not the majority. An example of a collectivistic outlook is that many students will take all their courses with their siblings and cousins throughout their degree; as an identical twin raised in Canada, Mary and I were encouraged to separate our classes since kindergarten. However, I came to realize that Omani students' desire to help each other succeed is something to be admired if *the help* came with knowing that friends need to be able to think things through by themselves—as I often try to communicate.

Work culture

Even though business culture guides about the Gulf point to the more authoritarian nature of management here, I found that teachers have quite a lot to contribute to the developing curriculum, and the dynamic has been more engaging in terms of teacher autonomy than some places I have worked in Canada. For example, when full-time teachers spoke up about wanting more flexibility in being on campus during workplace hours (8am–3pm), it was granted. I spoke up when I thought I could make a positive difference in terms of assessment and curriculum and was never shut down even if the direction went another way.

Students were generally receptive to me as a Canadian because of the favoured reputation Canada has abroad. I developed a close rapport with students in general, but it often takes a lot of emotional energy in the first few weeks because until they know you, they don't know you. These societies are tribal in nature, so one must find creative ways to make inroads of relatability. For example, telling them about my own family helps if it's relatable, like having a henna party for my son's wedding in Toronto.



Take the plunge

If it were not for the upheaval of the pandemic in our industry, I probably would never have ventured outside Canada, but I am grateful for this silver lining because it put the shoe on the other foot for me after years of teaching LINC, ESL, and EAP in Canada. Learning other national stories and seeing how they function differently is always broadening. Layering on another identity by living in another country and feeling that discomfort of being *between worlds*, as Edward Said wrote about, is an expanding adventure.

Author Bio



Barbara Stasiuk (she, her) started her teaching career teaching English and Social Studies for a Muslim group in Toronto. She has taught in many contexts including University of Toronto's International Summer Academy, York University, and Central Vancouver Island's Immigrant Multicultural Society's LINC program in Nanaimo BC. She has encountered Islamophobia so participated in the Canadian Council of Muslim Women's (CCMW) campaign—[Barbara's Story](#). She strives towards inclusion of every stripe and stroke that contributes to human dignity and felicity.