

Learning the Lingo

As international business continues to grow in the Middle East and the demand for a multilingual workforce with it, students can be left bewildered by the array of English courses available.

BY KAJA KNUDSEN



Nestled between Asia, Africa and Europe, the Middle East is increasingly becoming a cross-cultural hub for intercontinental trade and commerce. With English often considered the international language of business, there is a growing demand for the local population to keep up with competition and gain a working knowledge of the language. This, in particular, can be seen in the flourishing industries of information technology, research and science, oil and gas and diplomacy.

“Communication has been identified as the most common factor [that determines the] success or failure of a business throughout the world,” states Moaz Khan, from the international language center, Eton Institute. The learning center, in Dubai’s Knowledge Village, has seen the number of students enrolling to learn English increase by 80% in the last four years. Khan continues: “A working knowledge of English can help overcome such challenges, particularly in global business and in a country like the UAE, where English is becoming as popular as Arabic.”

Learning English can have “huge professional benefits” and open doors from a personal perspective, explains Shanae Reed, Director of the Language Studies Centre at

the University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD). Many universities and businesses in the region now require potential students and employees to have a minimum standard of English—something the education industry has not ignored. But, it is not just a case of enrolling on the first course available. Considerable thought needs to go into finding a suitable learning solution—and that’s just the beginning. To make the most of a course, students require dedication, commitment and hard work.

In response to the growing global interest in learning foreign languages, there is a vast array of courses and products available, including online, one-on-one and group classes, as well as study vacations and self-teaching tools, such as audio lessons. This is also true of the Middle East. Students now have greater access to native English-speaking teachers from around the world, whether they are online or living in the Middle East. “The nature of courses is equally as vast,” comments Ronan MacAonghusa, a private tutor in London. “Courses range from business to social English and can be specific to certain skills, such as academic writing or pronunciation, depending on learners’ needs.”

With such choice available, picking the right course for you can be confusing. All three experts stress the importance of choosing a method of study suitable to your requirements as well as your work and life commitments—and working hard at it. In order to negotiate the myriad choices and successfully complete a language course of your own, here are the experts’ top tips on how to decide on a program, and how to make it work.

BEFORE ENROLLING, CONSIDER...

Motivation

Understanding what is driving you to learn could “define the path for you,” according to Moaz Khan of Eton Institute. The approach to learning English for business can differ greatly to that which is required for university preparation or social use. Those hoping to secure employment or study overseas should consider taking an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) course or equivalent.

Private or Group Classes

Private courses are suitable for students with specific needs—such as presentation skills or academic writing—and who are “comfortable learning alone,” says Khan. A one-on-one class means it can be tailored to suit individual needs and will allow flexible hours for those traveling frequently, or with an unpredictable schedule. Group classes are suitable for those on a tighter budget and give learners the opportunity to engage with others and share learning experiences.

Studying abroad

Absolute beginners should consider taking a course locally before traveling to study, advises Ronan MacAonghusa. Once students reach an intermediate level, they can then start to think about traveling abroad for further study. An immersive approach to learning will speed up the acquisition of language, but it is good to have the basics secured beforehand. Furthermore, foreign study provides invaluable insight into culture, which “cannot be separated from language,” explains MacAonghusa.

Identify your weaknesses

Language is a skill—identify your weaknesses and work hard to make them your strengths, advises MacAonghusa. Native Arabic speakers with an existing knowledge of English are often competent at speaking and listening, but generally weaker at writing, specifically spelling and sentence structure. Considering their weaknesses before enrolling allows students to choose a course that will meet their needs. Most language courses will set students a test before placing them, in order to identify the level required and areas of study.

Honestly assess your availability

“Learning English involves more than investment of money,” explains MacAonghusa. Paying for a top class, school or tutor does not mean students will automatically improve; it takes time, effort and dedication. MacAonghusa advises that students hoping for a quick fix should think twice before enrolling in a course. If students do not have adequate time or motivation to invest, the results might not be satisfactory.

SO YOU’VE BEGUN—NOW WHAT?

Immerse yourself

Shanae Reed, at UOWD, advises that the most successful students are those who “make a concerted effort to immerse themselves in English outside of class”. Actively seeking conversations in English, or watching English language movies and television programs, are all vital ways of gaining knowledge and practicing newly-acquired languages.

Keep your eye on the target

It is easy to become distracted while studying, particularly when juggling learning with work and other commitments.



Creating an image of the end result will help keep students focused when motivation is low. Find a way to manage studying while allowing time for fun, too—for example, combine programming or presentation skills with the language you are learning.

Read

MacAonghusa strongly advises language learners to read widely, and on a variety of subjects. Another good approach is to change settings on laptops and mobile phones to English. Reading is a great way to build vocabulary and get a feel for the language, which is very important for writing.

Understand how you learn

If students understand their learning style early on, it will help “speed up the process,” explains Reed. Everybody’s memory works differently; for example, auditory learners will benefit greatly from listening to English throughout the day, whereas visual learners could do better working with images or attaching a visual interpretation to new vocabulary.

Get feedback and reflect

It is crucial to get feedback throughout the course and reflect upon what has been said, says MacAonghusa. Teachers must correct students and give advice, but subsequently, learners will need to listen out for those mistakes and rectify them.

THE COURSE IS COMPLETE, BUT DON’T FORGET THE GOLDEN RULE:

Practice

Language quickly disappears when it is not in use, so it is important for students to keep up with English by using it as often as possible, explains Khan. Continuing to listen or watch English language programs will keep learners engaged. Once your level of English is good enough, students may want to think of changing to a job that requires a more frequent use of their newly-learned language. 