

Kurds Demand English

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Changing conditions in Kurdistan mean greater opportunities for those who command proficiency in the language.

When Saryas Jamal, 34, began working in the accounting department of Asia Cell, the major mobile phone company in northern Iraq, he found that he had to deal daily with managers who do not speak Kurdish, the only language he speaks.

All business was conducted in English, so Jamal quickly realised that he had to learn the language in order to communicate with his bosses and be a useful employee. He now spends several hours a day trying to get to grips with it.

Like Jamal, other Iraqi Kurds are flocking to English classes, either out of necessity or personal choice.

English-language classes are a booming business in Sulaimaniyah, where private language centres and all-English schools are popping up all over the place.

The English language department at the University of Sulaimaniyah has had to expand its programme to accommodate 100 new students.

Bookstores have a hard time keeping English instruction books in stock.

"English has imposed itself on people," said English teacher, Faraydoon Abdulrahman, 27.

He thinks the rapid spread of information technologies, like the computer, the internet and satellite television, has led people to realise the importance of the language.

In addition, many international non-governmental organisations and new foreign companies in Kurdistan demand English-speaking employees, which also sends Kurds to language classes.

Awat Abdulla, 23, who writes literary pieces and articles on the problems of Kurdish youth for Kurdish newspapers and magazines, says being able to understand English is important because "when it comes to knowledge, English resources are the largest and most varied."

Abdullah is studying English at a private learning centre, as is Star Qadir, 36, a graduate of the College of Arts.

Qadir wants to begin a master's degree in fine arts next year and passing an English proficiency test is a requirement for graduate admission in most Iraqi universities.

There are a number of privately-owned English teaching centres in Sulaimaniyah where teachers charge an average of 20 US dollars per month. Classes generally run an hour a day, six days a week.

Banaz Muhammed, 34, works at the Apple Centre, which hold English language classes for people of all ages. He said the centre has more students than it can handle.

English is "the language of science and technology", Muhammed said. That is why people want to speak it.

Classes at the Apple Centre are not limited to adults.

Some 230 children under 10 are currently studying in Apple's English courses, and another 180 have enrolled for upcoming classes, according to Sirwan Sideeq, 35, who supervises the teaching of the English alphabet to children between 3-5 years at the centre.

Sharo Rizgar, 7, has been attending classes for the last two months at the facility. She now knows the English alphabet and can introduce herself in the language.

These private centres are not the only option for studying English.

In the Iraqi educational system, students start English classes in the fifth grade and study until they graduate from high school.

But many people claim these classes are inadequate.

"The English curricula and method of teaching in schools is not good enough to learn the language," said Sarwar Othman, 18, a high school graduate.

He is now taking English classes at the private Institute for English Development Language.

Primary school children can also study in Meads, a private all-English language school run by a Protestant church organisation.

The school never lacks students waiting for enrolment, said Meads's headmaster, Talib Shkoor, 62.

And at the university level, the English department of the University of Sulaimaniyah added night courses for about 100 students.

Abbas Mustafa, 38, the department chairperson, said it had to open the additional courses due to heavy demand.

By contrast, there is far less demand for either Arabic or Kurdish language courses at the university.

The increasing appetite for English is also reflected in the range of books sold in the bookshops.

Zhyan bookstore in Sulaimaniyah has a wide variety of titles, but more English language instruction ones are sold than any other type, said the shop's owner, Shorish Sabeer, 32.

Meanwhile, growth in the demand for English language instruction is likely to increase even further.

Yaseen Qadir, 38, the director of ACE private language centre, which teaches English-to-Kurdish translation, points out that if and when the situation in Iraq calms down quieter, more international companies and organisations will come to the country.

Then, he predicted, the ability to work in an English environment will be crucial if the Iraqi people want jobs or contracts.

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