

Nothing is Impossible: Life Story of a Syrian Language Learner

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I was born on June 24, 1977 in "Serghaya", a Syrian village with a population of about 50.000 people. During winter time, we sometimes get six or seven feet of snow. The village is located between two mountains and it is almost on the border of Syria and Lebanon. Syria is one of the Middle Eastern countries and it is an Arabic speaking state. I lost my parents when I was three years old. My mother died first, and I think she died because of asthma. Six months later, my father passed away because of a heart attack; he used to be a very heavy smoker. He used to smoke a lot, three or four packs a day, so it was very terrible life for all of us. I also remember my grandfather, who used to be in bed all the time not because he was paralyzed, but because he was very old. My father used to take care of him, and after my father death, he passed away maybe seven years later, as a result of natural death, unlike my parents.

I have five siblings; two brothers and three sisters and I am the youngest. Two of my sisters the oldest and the youngest were married at that time. My middle sister is still at home; she has not married yet. My oldest and middle brothers were not married, because they were very young. My uncle "Abd Al-ali ", who is not my real uncle, but is my father's cousin, is the person who used to take care of everybody. This was before I went to the orphanage.

Because they died very early in my life when I was three years old, I really do not remember anything about my parents. However, my family members used to tell me about them. My parents were very kind-hearted; my father worked as a clerk for the government. They had a farm and they used to work hard on it all the time because it was their main job beside my father's public service job. I was also told that they used

to use animals as their transportation means such as donkeys and horses. My sister told me a story, which happened to both of us when I was one year old. This story took place when we were living together in our parents' wooden house in a rural area located in the countryside which was about 45 minutes from Damascus. She told me that a snake was coming toward me, and she wanted to protect me, as a result, she got bitten by the snake. It was really terrible, because we did not have a hospital or a medical center in our area; therefore, they had to take her to Damascus for treatment. She laid in bed for about two months because of that snake but she survived. When I was a child, I felt that I was much nurtured in terms of affection; my family loved me a lot. However, in terms of entertainment tools or toys, I did not get anything of those, because if my parents would have bought me one of them, we may not have been able to eat for a week or so. The main problem at that time was the fact that my parents did not have a lot of money to provide me with, because life was really very difficult for them and for every family who lived in the countryside. For example, they worked hard on their farms during summer season, but they spent all they got in the winter. Therefore, my family and the rest of families who lived in that countryside are considered from the lowest class of the society in terms of financial and educational perspectives.

I think that I inherited hardwork and hope from my parents because the farming entails hard work and hope when the farmers wait about a year for their crops to yield.

When I came to America, I got married to an American girl. She would sometimes see me cry. She would come and say to me "You're crying. Why are you crying?" I tell her that I remember my family back home, or I remember my parents. Sometimes, it just happens, I remember them, and that, most of the time, I feel very sad, and very distressed.

When I was about three or four years old, as far as I can recall they would dress me very well, with clean clothes. I used to go outside, and when I come back, maybe three, four, or five hours later, I had the mud all over my body from head to toe, because I used to play in mud. I also remember that I used to make my own hookah "shisha". I made a bucket of water, then I put a pipe in it, and I would pretend as if I were smoking. I might have done that because I wanted to imitate my father when he was smoking. However, I smoke hookah nowadays. I do really wish if I were a kid again, because the childhood time is an important stage in everybody's life.

One of the cultural influences that I think has an impact on me from that environment is the smoking. I am a very heavy smoker; I started smoking hookah too much at the end of my teenage years.

My grandparents' brothers immigrated from Syria to Brazil or Argentina and their grandchildren are still there. However, my grandparents preferred to stay in Syria and not immigrate to any country.

When I used to live in Syria, I noticed that it had a diverse culture, for example, people who lived on the coast were different from people who lived in the countryside and also different from people who lived close to the Syrian and Iraqi borders. These differences are in terms of their clothes, dialects, food, etc. Therefore, the people who lived in my village had different clothes and dialect in comparison to the others and even the local identities varied from one part of the country to another. Moreover, the countryside that I lived in as I mentioned earlier was very cold during the winter time; therefore, the people did not do anything in winter because they depended mostly on farming for their living. So they worked only in the spring, summer, and fall. All the people who lived in my village were the same. They had the same traditions, kind of

work, and habits. They used to wake up in the early morning, to go to their farms, and they used to come back home at about six or seven pm, therefore, they used to go to bed very early. Moreover, in the late 1970s and early 1980s people in the village did not have electricity, so they used to use the oil lamps to see at night time. The only entertainment device that they had at that time was the radio, and not everyone was able to own one. Therefore, you would find maybe thirty or forty people gathered all in the yard, under the trees and listening to the radio.

After my parents' death, my uncle -who was really a very good man- took me to an orphanage to be adopted by them. This orphanage is called SOS "Kinderdorf". SOS stands for "save our souls" and "Kidnerdrof" is a German word which means "children's village". The orphanage was not sponsored or funded by the Syrian government. It was funded by the European Union, and mainly a German-Austrian organization. SOS adopts children who are orphans, foundlings, and kids who are in need for care because of their different negative social factors such as abuse and others. SOS has what they call it the children village which is consisted of 8 houses. Each house has six to eight children and the total of the adopted girls and boys was sixty five. Nowadays they have three branches of that orphanage in Syria and may be four thousand children villages all over the world. Before he left me, I remember my uncle saying to me that I would have a better life and I would be taken care of by the orphanage. He also gave me some advice like do your prayers, do your fasting, take care of yourself, do well at school and so forth.

To say the truth, when I first moved there, it was very difficult for me because I didn't think that I would like it. I felt very sad losing my biological brothers and sisters. I did not feel comfortable at the beginning, really, because I felt as if I were kidnapped from my original family. I was even very angry with my uncle, who took me there, because I

used I to say to myself, okay, why did he take me there? Why didn't I stay with my family? Of course I was very mad at him, I was even mad at my brothers and sisters who were not eligible to be adopted because of their age. I think that the SOS adopts children who are newborn babies to I think five years old. Later on, I began to get used to the new social environment. Things got better, and got easier for me. So at first, all the residents of the house did not get along, of course, because we were all different. We came from different parts of the country, different backgrounds, and different families. Moreover, some of us had different religious backgrounds, such as Islam and Christianity. However, the orphanage atmosphere was secular. I remember when my uncle left me in that orphanage, he told me that you will have a better life here. My eldest brother used to call or visit me every month, and he used to bring to me clothes, presents, and money. My uncle used to give him the money when he was not able to .come to me

When I first moved in the SOS house, we were about seven children. I think four girls and three boys. Our ages ranged from 5-7 years. We grew up together and had brotherly and sisterly relationships. We lived really as brothers and sisters in one house. Even though, we were not biologically related to each other, we were emotionally related. Moreover, our house was basically the same of other SOS houses and was run by what we called 'a mother', who stayed all the time with us and acted as if she was our real mother. I remember that our mother was very strict with all of us and she used to check our school subjects grades all the time. I also remember when I got a very good grade; we used to celebrate all together for that achievement. When our substituted mother used to go in her holiday, another woman took over the responsibility and was in charge of the home in the absence of our mother; we called

her "aunt". So life in our house was a family-based environment. In short this organization let us feel as if we have a family that can substitute our real families.

When I was adapted to this new culture, I felt that I have been taken care of. I felt as if I lived in my real family and between my siblings. We were six brothers and sisters and lived in one house. We acted as if we were family members and we took care of each other. We were sleeping, eating, playing, and studying together under the supervision of our SOS mother who took care of us as if we were her real children. We were also responsible for cleaning our house and we used to go to school every day like other kids who lived their normal lives with their biological parents. However, when we reached the puberty stage, we moved to houses which were designated to the youth. Moreover, during my stay in the orphanage, all the children were provided with all what they need such as school related things, gifts, and monthly pocket money, which was about five hundred Syrian Pounds (ten dollars). Usually, some people from other countries such as USA or European countries volunteer to sponsor financially some kids who live in SOS . I personally had been sponsored by someone for about six months or a year; I don't actually remember, but I had received money and gifts from him. I frankly feel that I had been nurtured emotionally and financially in the orphanage more than when I lived with my original family. However, some of my brothers and sisters had been sponsored years and years and they really got whatever they needed. On the other hand, since my outsider sponsor took care of me for just about six months or one year, I felt that I had not been taken care of as my other brothers and sisters. Therefore, I was motivated to work hard at my school and got the highest grades and that what I actually had done. Our daily schedule at the orphanage was not normal during the academic year, because we used to go to school at morning time 8:00 AM to 1:00 PM on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. However, we used to go afternoon on

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday at 12:00 P.M to 5:00 P.M. Before we used to go to school, we used to have our breakfast and take some sandwiches or fruits with us and we used to have a public bus which took us from our house to the school and the same for returning to our house. When we come back to our house we have our lunch and some of us take a nap for an hour or two; others do their homework. We usually go outside to play afternoon, if we do not have an afternoon school, we have to be back home by 9:00 PM or 10:00 PM. However, we usually have our dinner ready by 7:30 PM or 8:00 PM, so we usually come to our house by that time and watch TV until 10:30 PM and then we have to go to bed. Our SOS mother, who usually stays with us twenty four hours, has her own bedroom. She usually cooks to us our meals and our sisters help her, so it was like a real family living.

Culturally speaking, I believe that I moved from a Muslim culture where I belong to a new culture which was the Christian-based culture. When my uncle visited me in the orphanage, he was surprised because of the way I was dressed or the type of clothes I wore such as shorts which were very strange to him. Since he was a very devout religious person, each time he visited me he asked me not to wear such clothes.

In the culture where I used to live with my parents, all the celebrations, festivals, and feasts, were based on Islamic teachings. For example, we used to have, what we would call, Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fiter, which comes right after the fasting month of Ramadan. These were the main cultural celebrations with my original family. However, I do not remember that we celebrated any other culture occasions, for example, Christmas or maybe Easter. However, when I moved in to that orphanage, we celebrated all the Christian occasions. We used to color eggs for Easter, for example. Beside the Christian celebrations we also used to celebrate Islamic occasions in that orphanage as well. I can say that I have adapted some values from both cultures.

However, I feel that nowadays, I just practice my original family's values, like the Muslim values which were not emphasized in orphanage, for example. When I used to live in the orphanage it wasn't important whether we fasted or not it was up to the person her/himself.

I remember that I have attended many Islamic Sufism celebrations such as the prophet birthday and I used to like such celebrations. I used to listen to live Islamic religious songs and they were very good. I felt very comfortable when I listened to those songs, the rhythms, the melody, and the words. I really felt solemn and I still liked such songs even nowadays. In Syria, the first morning after Ramadan, we go to the prayer. Then we celebrate this occasion with our family members, then with our relatives, friends, and everyone we see in the street we kiss him and wish him a happy Eid. Even people whom we don't know we shake hands with them. During the Ramadan or the Eid, we always try to forgive anyone who has been rude or mean to us and forget any bad behavior they did onto us. Nowadays, I fast during Ramadan, although when it comes to praying I do not do it all the time.

The first time I felt deeply sad because of death, was when my uncle who took me to the orphanage passed away. I felt that nothing was left for me in life after his death. This was about seven years ago. I also believe that the saddest day in my life, when my SOS mother not my biological mother passed away. Even though, she was very tough with us, she did that for our good. She took care of me for about ten years and she treated all of my brothers and sisters in our SOS house equally. Sometimes you feel really very sad, when death kidnapped a loved one even if s/he is not related in blood to you. My experience in life taught me that if a stranger takes care of you, you may love him more than your biological parent even if the later doesn't care enough for you. I strongly believe that care is very important. One of the unforgettable events in

my life, was when I was twelve years old. My family members in the SOS house told me that they were going to party for my distinguished accomplishment in the school. They took me to the hospital and they said to me that we came here for treating another person. After a while, the doctor came to me and said since you are from the countryside and specifically "*Serghaya*" the home of the smugglers who smuggle oil, cloths, and all kinds of goods from Lebanon, you are absolutely tough and strong like them, therefore, you don't need to have anesthesia for the operation pain and we will start the surgery right way. I believe he was joking at that time. After a while, I awoke from the numbness and found out that they removed my tonsils and I stayed in bed for about two weeks. Later on, they told me we didn't like to tell you about the surgery, so you don't get worried. However, they kept their promise and made the party when I felt healthy.

When I was at the elementary school, I used to have some friends. Those friends were willing to give me anything that they could give, because they expected something in return. I used to be very good at school, so they became my friends in order to teach and tutor them. I remember when I was in the first grade, the sixth grade teacher would come to my class and ask my teacher to take me to her sixth grade class just to ask me about the multiplication table in front of her students, because I was really very good in memorizing multiplications. When we enter the class she asked me "What is the result of six times seven? Five times eight?" And I kept answering her right away. So, the teacher kept blaming and criticizing her students "you see; a first grader knows the multiplication table and you don't". This situation really boosted up my motivation and had a very positive and strong impact on my performance in school. I remember that the school chose me to be one of the best five students to represent our school against other students from other schools in an educational competition for learning purposes.

Because I was really very good in general knowledge and in English too, I also had very strong memory. Being a member of this group motivated me a lot and encouraged me to keep going in my studies. When I was in the ninth grade at the end of the academic year, some of my friends told me that I failed, so I was really very sad, because I was very positive that I did very good. However, while I was swimming in the swimming pool with my friends at the orphanage, some people came to us and said that the results were posted on the bulletin board. We went to school and I discovered that I passed the ninth grade with high grades; I got 225 out of 290. The result was really like a surprise for me.

When I talk about school, I always remember my first day of school. I was very happy when I first attended the school because I thought it would be a new experience for me and it would be a new different stage when I would feel that I would be a way from my house. Therefore, I enjoyed the school from the beginning until today when I am doing my Masters degree. In the intermediate school and specifically in the seventh grade we had to study a foreign language. As students, we had to study either French or English, so I chose French at the beginning. However, I didn't like the course, so I switched to English when I was in the eighth grade. When I chose English, I was taught by a very nice and good EFL teacher who made me really like this language from the eighth grade until today. This EFL teacher taught me in the eighth and ninth grade and motivated me not only to love this language but also to pursue my BA in English Literature, MA in Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages TESOL, and also applied to the PhD in TESOL in the Composition and TESOL C&T program at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania IUP. I was admitted and will continue my study in the Fall of 2008. As far as the teaching methodology is concerned, I remember my favorite EFL teacher used to follow the Grammar Translation Method by providing us

with literary passage or maybe a scientific passage depending on your school whether it is a scientific or literary. Then, you had to translate the passage. Moreover, we sometimes had questions about the passage, and we had to answer them. As a result, you would have some ideas that you would compose a piece of writing. He also used to teach us some derivatives, for example, he would give us a list of nouns and we had to give a list of adjectives or verbs that we had to derive from the words. I also remember that we had been given list words and we had to give back the opposites of these words. I also remembered that our teacher used to follow sometimes the audio-lingual approach by bringing cassette player or a CD player to make us listen to music with some posters or some colored papers and we enjoyed the way he used them. He made our class really fun. He also used to give us quizzes every other week, to motivate us to study for the class. Moreover, we also used to have pop quizzes all of a sudden. I remember that when any student got 23 out of 25, he would give him a present to encourage him and other students to perform better. When I was in 12th grade, he taught me for about two months; he was surprised of my English performance, so he told me "you are very good at English, I hope you will get a masters degree in English". His prediction was right, because I am almost done with my masters at English. When I was studying in the elementary school, I wanted to be an English teacher when I got old.

When I had reached my teenage phase and became about thirteen-year old, the SOS moved me from the children house to another institution affiliated with the orphanage. This institution is called the "youth house" where the young people, only males are living together. I lived there when I was about thirteen-year old until I reached about twenty-year old. At that time I made really a lot of friendships. However, most of whom were my friends from my old SOS "children village" where we used to live as neighbors. I used to play with those friends football as a goal keeper and

basketball, watch movies, read books since the time of my staying in the house of the "children village". So they were my friends since my childhood. Moreover, I still have relationships with most of them until today. I usually contact them via my Yahoo Messenger, Hotmail Messenger, and Skype. We chat all the time. They even call me nowadays and I also call them back. I actually have all their contact information. However, some of them have left to other countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, but others are still living in Syria.

Like any other teenager, I felt pressure from other gender, and I would do things that are not approved by our mother and the community as well. Because when you reach this point of your age you think that you become a man and you can do whatever you like. I remember that teenagers at that age were trying to smoke. However, our mother in our house was very strict and she was punishing any one of us who smoked, but in other houses there were teenagers who continued to smoke, so it depended on the mother who ran the house, whether she was strict or not. I remember that some teenagers in the school like my friends and I used to have small gang which is consisted of three or four people. We grouped and studied together; we also used to defend each other when there is a problem. We had meetings all the time. I also recall that I was an athlete; I used to have my own dumbbells and I used also to go to the gym because we had a big gym.

When I was sixteen year-old I moved out of the orphanage, and I went to my original family's house and lived with my biological brothers and my sister. My oldest brother has his wife and his kids living with us as well as my middle brother who was single at that time and my sister who is the middle among my two sisters. I had stayed with them until I came to the USA. When I moved in my family's house, I began to work with my brothers. We worked as construction workers. So, I worked with them

during my two last years in the high school (11th grade & 12th grade) and my first two years in the university (freshmen & sophomore years). I remember when I used to be a construction worker; I made about \$10 a day, which was considered to be a very good income in Syria.

When I enrolled at the university, I found really a very big difference in terms of class size, teaching methodologies, and other teaching issues between high school level and the university level. At the high school, our classes were about 30 to 40 students, however, at the university level we used to have about 400 students in the class and they put us in one auditorium. In terms of teaching methodology, at the high school level, all the classes were based on teacher-centered approach, therefore, the teacher was very authoritarian and you just do whatever s/he asked you to do without any negotiation. However, at the university level, we used to follow the collaborative learning approach especially in seminar courses which had about 25 students, and we used to have small and large group discussions, you could talk or say whatever you want, when we were discussing a short story you could say, discuss, or speak up your mind about how you think, or what you think the story, the short story, or the poem was about, I also remember that in the high school level, they used to teach us general English all the four skills in one subject; reading, writing, speaking, and listening, whereas at the university level, the courses were more specialized, we had poetry, literature, grammar, writing, and some other specialized courses. I think it was different because at the University level, my major was English and English literature so it was more specialized than the English taught at the high school level. In my last two years at the university in junior and senior years, I left the construction work. I worked in what we call a translation center back home, I think it's called Al-Anwar, establishment for university services, I used to work in translation, I translated what other friends,

other translators, or maybe two or three novels for the English department, we used to proof read all the lectures given by the teachers in the university. After my graduation, I used to have some problems and fights all the time with my brothers because of financial matters such as the inheritance. These problems lasted from 2004 to 2006, two years before I came to US. I was very mad of them because they used to do take decisions concern all of us without telling or consulting me or even our sisters, for example, they would sell a piece of land of our farm and neither did I know nor did our sisters anything about that, moreover, my sisters and I did not get our share from the land that was sold. Such behavior really hearted me. However, I have very good relationships with my sisters whom I used to visit them in their houses every week and stay with them one or two days, although they lived 45-50 minutes away from where I used to live. Although, I suffered from my brothers, I forgive them for every bad thing that they did to me, and I am willing to help them in anything that they will need as much as I can because they are my family, and forgiveness is very important.

During my undergrad studies and after my graduation, I didn't have any convenient contact with native speakers from English-speaking countries. There was someone who I think from South Africa which has English and French as its official languages. I used to converse with him most of the time. The only opportunity that I had contact with English native speakers is when we had professors who used to come from United Kingdom or the United States of America to visit Syria for teaching us just for two, three, or four weeks and then they leave. These professors taught us poetry and drama like plays Hamlet, Shakespeare mainly. Whenever, I feel distressed because of the coursework either when I was undergrad or graduate student I go to bed and sleep right away.

When I studied English Literature, I found a lot of differences between Arabic and English literature in terms of poetry and dramas. For example, Arabic poetry had mainly to do with the environment in where the poet lived, whereas English poetry was more general. For instance, in the old Arabic literature, the poet starts his poem by talking about his horse, then he talks about the house or household, next he talks about the war because Arabs' tribes were fighting each other at that time, so all these topics in one poem, whereas in English, Shakespeare always talks about love in his poem. In regard to dramas, English has a lot of dramas and plays more than what Arabic has.

After my graduation from the university, I served the army for two years as a lieutenant when I had to do my military service. The first six months were just training about combat and different weapons. The next year and a half, I used to teach English as well as Arabic to cadets at the military academy. During my military service, I applied to the Ministry of Education to be a high school EFL teacher. However, they used to have a contest for choosing among the applicants, and fortunately I was the first among my group and I was accepted for that job. After finishing the military service, I got my job immediately. I was really very happy, I taught English at the high school level. When I compare the military life and the civilian life I find a big difference between them. For example, when I used to teach at the military academy, I had to teach 150-200 people and for 100-120 hours every month. I was paid just \$15 including the accommodations. I remember I taught in a big long hall and all the cadets were very tired, wore dirty clothes, and felt sleepy during my class so the atmosphere was really very bad and unhealthy. The civilian life, on the other hand, is much easier. In the civilian context, we had thirty or forty students maximum, most of them, they're there to learn, unlike those people in the army, they didn't care about learning English; they just want to pass to the next year, to the third year, and then to become lieutenants in

the army. Moreover, as an EFL teacher at the Ministry of Education I used to teach only 70 hours a month and I got paid about \$200 monthly, which was much more than the military academy payment. Generally speaking, military life was very harsh and difficult. I remember, as a lieutenant I was very flexible with the soldiers, but I had the same military rank friends who were really very mean to them. People sometimes serve may be two, three, four, or five years because there was not clear regulation about the military service. As a result, when people serve in the military they feel that they are not productive in terms of individual income and life style. Therefore, when the citizen finishes his obligatory military service, he will start over his productive life from the beginning.

After the military service and when I became an EFL teacher at the Ministry of Education, I used also to do a private tutoring for students as well as to work also at institutes to teach English after I finish my teaching at the high school. When I tutor students either privately or at the institutions, I used to get \$10 for a session (an hour-2 hours). Therefore, my income from the three jobs was about \$500 a month, which was a little bit more than enough for me as a person. Teaching EFL in Syria is used to be socially a respectable and an attractive job. Nevertheless, in the last seven years, people started looking down on teachers because they are not making enough money, as a result, they resort to other means to make more and more money. Therefore, people keep saying that teachers don't work hard at school to get private tutoring. Moreover, it is not unusual to see civil engineers who studied in England or Scotland and when they come to Syria, they work as private part-time tutors by teaching individual students, working in institutions for teaching English, or doing both jobs, in addition to their main job, which is civil engineering.

When I taught, I discovered an important point, teaching in my point view does not depend only on the teacher's knowledge and rather it is a question of what and how to teach. Therefore, teaching is knowledge as well as art. That's why some researchers believe that teachers are artists at the same time. Moreover, I think there is a lot of research that says teachers teach the way they were taught. I personally did this, either consciously or unconsciously. I was really influenced by the teaching method that my eighth grade EFL teacher followed with us. I used to engage all my students in the classroom activities, although it was very difficult for me to do this, I used to do it. In other words I used to follow the collaborative learning approach to some extent, because we were restricted as teachers to our curricula that were designed and distributed by the Ministry of Education. Therefore, we did not have the full freedom to do whatever we wanted to do. On the other hand, our students had some difficulties accepting the idea that their group members in whatever activity they were doing would give them a feedback on their work like a writing piece and this is an Arabic cultural trait. Because our students always think that the only expert in the class is the teacher who has the comprehensive knowledge about the area s/he teaches. For example, if a student asks a teacher a question about the meaning of a specific word, and the teacher does not know the answer, the student will think that the teacher is not qualified to teach at all, which is in my opinion not true. However, in my case, when students used to ask me about specific word and I didn't know the meaning, I told them I would look it up in the dictionary and answer you tomorrow. Unfortunately, there are other teachers who may give the students wrong answers but not say I do not know, because they afraid that they may be underestimated by the students if they would say the truth to them.

While I was working at the high school level, my friends and I used to have what we call it now the “community of practice”. We used to have seven or eight teachers, English teachers, math teachers, Arabic teachers, and physics teachers, who used to meet at one of our houses. We used to change our meeting place every week. For example, if we meet at my house this week, our next week would be at another's house and so on. When we meet together, we used to talk about almost everything, such as school related things, politics, news, and any other topics. In our meetings, we used to have a dinner. I think this was a very good opportunity for me to develop myself professionally and personally as a teacher and as a person respectively. These meetings lasted for about four years during my EFL teaching experience back in Syria.

In terms of foreign languages, I speak English as my second language and I have a very good command of German because I studied German for three or four years. When I was doing my B.A in English and English literature, I was required to take another foreign language course. Therefore, I had the option to choose one course from a foreign language list which included Russian, Spanish, German and French, and I chose German. Nowadays they have included two other foreign languages; Chinese and Japanese. When I chose German, it was because we had the history of the English language and how the English language is very close to the German language and how English is originally a Germanic language. So I wanted to see how these two languages are similar and different in terms of grammar, and this even helped me in my English courses, especially in the courses that had to do with the history of the English language.

Since I master two foreign languages English as well as German, I really enjoy the former more than the later, because I use English all the time here in America. I am in contact with English native speakers as well as students from other parts of the world

who have to use English in USA in order to survive. I remember when I used to do my undergrad studies back in Syria; I used to read a lot, In addition to my reading assignments, I used to read English newspaper which is called Syria times in order to develop my reading skills. When my friends used to visit me in my house in Syria, they found me lying in the bed and looking up words in the dictionary page by page and whenever I come across a word it stuck in my mind. Because when I read a word I try to visualize it in my mind and try to write it down, I also used to read the word in context. I also make up sentences that included the word, so I could not forget it. I also use the word' inflectional and derivational suffixes and prefixes. For example, if I come across a word like "able" I used to read all the other words that can be made up of it such as "enable", "ability", "disability", and "disabled". Therefore, I think this is why they used to call me all the time "the walking dictionary" because I used to know a lot of words and I still do.

I mentioned before that I did my undergrad studies in Syria, however, when I came to USA, I realized that there is a big and wide gap between learning EFL in Syria and learning ESL in USA. For example, when I used to learn EFL in Syria, it was, unfortunately, out of context learning environment, because we used to learn how the sentence can structured and how the language can be used but we didn't have the opportunity to practice what we had learned due to the lack of communication with native speakers. Moreover, when I first came to US two years ago, I had encountered a problem of how to communicate with native speaker and this was one of the bad memories of my learning experience. I felt that I know their vocabulary but I don't know how to reply to them because I was afraid to speak up, I really felt hesitant to communicate. However, when the time passes, I gradually felt confident and things got much better. The good experience with learning English is that English becomes to me

as the window by which I can see other cultures from all over the world. Since my arrival to US, I have been in contact with many people from different nationalities such as; Japanese, Chinese, Indians, and many other people. The only common language by which we can communicate is English, so because of this language I am able to deal orally with them and to be familiar with their cultures. I think we have saying in Arabic that "every language you know, it makes you a different person", so if you speak only English you are one person, if you speak English and Arabic, you are two persons at the same time. So language is by itself defines your identity. However, there are Arabs who think that when you learn English, it may change your identity. Others who are extremer, believe that US is the enemy of Arabic world, so we should not learn English. I personally think that these people are narrow-minded, because English opens many doors to you which may not be opened if you don't know the language. Therefore, I strongly encourage people to learn a second language either English or any other one.

Since I talked about my interaction with native speakers and international students here in USA, I believe that it is a good opportunity to talk also about how I got to America. I used to contact by the email a friend of mine who is from Syria, and he is almost done with his PhD in civil engineering at Cambridge University in United Kingdom. He told me that the SOS "Kinderdorf" International, which is funded by the German and Austrian governments, sent him to U.K. to pursue his graduate studies, so he suggested that I should apply to them for a scholarship. So I told the Syrian Association of Children's Villages about my desire and they said to me that they would have no problem but I had to apply first to universities in USA and get admission letter and then I can apply to the scholarship. They said to me that they chose US because it is cheaper in terms of expenses and school tuitions. Then I applied to three schools in USA; Indian University of Pennsylvania, San Francisco State University, and Monterey

Institute of International Studies. After that, I received admission letters and the I-20s from all the three school. I went back to the Syrian Association of Children's Village and I gave all the documents that I had from the schools. They contacted the SOS organization and they shocked me with their response, they told me that they would pay for either the school tuition or the living expenses. I was frustrated and thought that there would be no hope for me to go to US. However, after about a year and a half, I had been contacted by the SOS organization and they told me that the president of that organization who was from Austria would visit Syria. I had a meeting with a committee, which represented the organization and they agreed to provide me with the scholarship for some reasons, firstly I was adopted by them and they noticed that I was very motivated to pursue my graduate studies. Secondly it was part of their humanitarian aid for me as a student, as a person, and as a child in that orphanage. Thirdly, I got a diploma in linguistics which is two years after the B.A. and my GPA is very good in my undergrad studies. Fourthly, they examined my educational history and my five-year experience in teaching EFL and they considered them as good credits for me. Fifthly, I had all my documents for the American schools ready with me. For all those reasons the committee members were convinced. When the SOS president had come to Syria, I met with the him for just five minutes and he said to me " we are going to send you the financial guarantee within two or three days and you can apply for a visa." He also said that we made an exception decision just for you and we will pay your school tuitions and your living expenses.

When I got my financial guarantee, I applied for an interview appointment to get my visa from the US embassy in Damascus. Three days later, they had contacted me and asked me to come to the embassy. I met with the consulate officer and I gave him all the required documents such as the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) I-20,

the financial guarantee, and the TOEFL score which was 620. After talking with him, the officer told me that he believed me but they have to make a security check before they provide me with the visa and it usually takes from two to four weeks to tell me whether my visa application is approved or not. He told me if the Embassy would not contact you within this period, call me. However, I was surprised that they called me three days later and they told me that my visa was ready and asked me to come and pick it up. Although Syria is characterized as an evil country, it took me a proximately a week to for visa process from the beginning to the end, and other people usually wait may be three or four months to have their visas ready but in my case I guess I was very lucky. I remember that I got my visa on July 11th, 2006 and arrived to US on August 21st, 2006 Before the IUP orientation day. However, before I had come to US I bought everything I needed. My sponsor provided me with \$700 as a pocket money as well as my ticket to US. I usually contact the US students' coordinator who takes care of all students who are sponsored by our organization. She took care of our tuitions and our expenses money and if we have any emergency we must contact her. Therefore, I always email her every now and then. When I came to US, I first arrived at the Chicago airport, and I had not have courage to speak with the custom officer there. I felt as if I was a speechless. This situation lasted with me for about four weeks, even in my classes when the professors lectured, I could not understand anything, although I had my B.A in English and English Literature and I also got a diploma in Linguistics. However, after the first four weeks everything got easier. I remember, even back home in Syria, the first four weeks of the semester were tough in English subjects. Culturally speaking, when I first arrived to the IUP, they told us you may experience "culture shock" and I did go through it on the first four weeks in my classes and out of them. I faced many cultural issues that are forbidden in my Arabic culture. I found that there are a lot

of differences between the American and Arabic cultures. For example, I think the US culture is, what we call it, more secular than the culture we have back home. The Arabic culture, or let's say the Syrian sub-culture, is a very religion-driven, that's what we call Muslim culture, there are things that you cannot do, not because of culture, not because only of religion, but because of the way people think.

When I first met my American wife, we were taking a class together, and this class was in my first semester at IUP. It was ESL/EFL Methodology and it was taught by Dr. Gebhard. We saw each other in that class and we fell in love. After about 8 months we got married. We had two ceremonies for our marriage; the first was the Muslim ceremony and it was on Friday April 27th, 2007, and a week later we had our second ceremony and it was the American ceremony on May 5th, 2007. It was in the yard, so we call the yard wedding. We invited all our friends and our classmates. After getting married to my American wife, there were some cultural conflicts between mine and her culture. I had been raised with different values and believes than the Americans' ones. For example, after our marriage, my wife believed that kissing in public places is acceptable based on her culture. On the other hand, I did not believe in the same value. I tried to convince her that I was raised in different culture and she was too and nothing actually wrong with both cultures but I cannot do it in public places; I can show you my love in many different ways, after that she respected and understood my ideas. Moreover, I also told her that I don't believe that I should impose one of my culture values on you if you don't believe in it. This culture value is woman should wear the veil. However, I don't think that you will be comfortable doing that. So, we are trying to close the gap between our two different cultures. I think we will succeed because she loves me and I love her. My wife is really very nice, she's also very kind-hearted, she cares a lot about me, and I care a lot about her. Thanks God, so far everything is good. I

think the best part of any marriage that you always feel that you are taken care of, and you always feel that there is someone else whom you have to take care, so it's a mutual respect, mutual understanding, and mutual care all at the same time. So you feel respected, and you feel that you respect someone else, so it's like mutual understanding. An interesting thing happened to my wife in her marriage, she has two siblings, so she was the last one to get engaged and the first one to get married. Isn't that strange? Everything in our marriage happened so fast. In terms of fitting together my marriage life and my study commitments, I think as a married person I have to make a compromise, I can't have all the time to my wife, and I can't have all the time to my school, so it's like a compromise, I have to make a balance between the two. For example, my wife today asked me to go with her to visit her aunt in Altoona, it's about an hour from here, I told her I can't, she told me no, go, go, go, so I said, no I have study project to do. So, sometimes I have to make compromise for my commitments.

We plan to have our first child in the near future after about three years. When we have children in the future, I think they will be very fortunate because they are going to be exposed to two different cultures USA and Arabic. Moreover, they will be able to speak two languages English and Arabic. I hope that we will have two or three children regardless of their genders whether girls, boys, or both. I will not interfere in their future plans when they grow up. They will be what they want to be. I will try to help them out in their lives as much as I can. However, their future plans are their own choice.

Since I am a Muslim and an Arab who came from Syria, I feel homesick here in Indiana, PA. Therefore, the sense of community is important for me. As a result, I contact some members of both Arabic community and Muslims who belong to the Muslim Students Association MSA at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. When I

participate in meetings prepared by either one of the two communities, or meet by accident with one or more of these communities' members, I feel really comfortable.

I spend most of my leisure time reading books and browsing the internet, I do both activities because I am doing my Masters degree nowadays. As far as the special people in my life are concerned, I believe that my uncle Abd Al-ali is one of the most influential people in my life. I love him so much. In spite of his poor financial status and the fact that he was responsible for his own family (wife and children), he took care of my biological brothers and sisters and he used to visit me every two or three weeks in the orphanage. He also helped me out to have a good military service environment when I was doing my service. Therefore, he supported us emotionally and provided us with whatever we needed as far as he could. Another person, of course, my wife who has lot of influence on me, she provides me with all kinds of support, not only emotional support, but also with any support that I am in need for. In a totally different situation, I also remember that I took some pictures with the former president of Syria Hafez AL-Asad when he visited the orphanage in 1982.

When I look at the history from a political view, I actually have what I call my heroes. One of them is a local hero and his name is Yusef Al-azmah. In the early 20th century, the French army invaded Syria from their colony Lebanon. The battle took place in the countryside where I used to live. Yusef Al-azmah fought the French army with only 400 people of his followers who had traditional guns at that time. The French army, on the other hand, was very well equipped with sophisticated weapons. The battle took one week. AL-Azmah died in that battle and he is considered one of Syria's heroes.

So far, I believe that I have almost achieved my ambitions, because I will finish my masters degree in TESOL within a month and I will start my PhD studies next fall of 2008. Moreover, I feel that I contributed to my community back home in Syria, when I was a teacher. I was renowned in my village because when I was the first in the Ministry of Education contest, my name appeared in the newspaper and all the people who lived there knew about me. Therefore, every family wanted me to tutor their children. They used to make me a good example for their children because I was self-made person; I accomplished everything in my life by myself without any help from anybody even my own biological family, except the orphanage which supported me in the beginning of my life. The motivation is very simple because I had the will to do something useful in life.

As a teacher, I strongly believe in the following saying "To teach is to learn twice" or "Teaching is learning", so as a teacher, I learn through teaching, and teachers are supposed to undergo a continuous process of development. And I also believe that I have to develop myself, not only professionally, but also personally, so I have to develop what I am as a teacher, as well as who I am as a person, and how I communicate with people, how I get involved in the social life. Moreover, the strength that I think I have is motivation. I feel motivated all the time, and I think motivation is what made me what I am now, or what made me reach what I've reached so far. Really, I think motivation is the most important factor driving people to be what they are. And another thing is the financial need. I think need is also important, because sometimes need is what makes you who you are, and need what makes you want to be somebody influential in your community.

In terms of controlling my financial, emotional, and social aspects in my life, I believe that I am satisfied so far here in Indiana, PA. Financially, I have a temporal job,

I have a scholarship for my future PhD studies, and I also have got a teaching assistantship in the fall of 2008 to teach Arabic here at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. So I think financially I am in control. Emotionally, I'm as I mentioned earlier, married. I have a wife; we care about each other, and we love each other. Socially, of course, I have a lot of friends, I am involved in the Muslim community, not only the Muslim community, but also people from all over the world, from different cultures, from different countries, and they speak different languages. What unifies us here, is the fact that we are studying together, we speak the same language, even though our native languages are very different, but English is what unifies us here as students, or as people here in the United States.

I believe that the most important decision that I took in my life is marriage. Because marriage is a lifelong process, it is not a temporary point in your life. Marriage is a lot of responsibilities; it is something that is built on mutual respect, care, understanding, and other important aspects.

I have learned from my difficulties that need is one of the most important basis of motivation. I also have learned that education is what will make you what you want to be in most cases. Encouragement is also an important lesson that I learned from life difficulties. When people support you emotionally and help you build the confidence in yourself, this will make you go further and further toward achieving your goals in life. So, I remember when I finished my B.A. people keep encouraging me to continue my diploma, and when I finished my Diploma they also encouraged me to go for my Masters degree, which is almost done and my graduation ceremony will be on May 10th, 2008. Three months ago, my wife and friends encouraged me to apply for the PhD and I got accepted, so I will continue my final practical learning process within the domain of the PhD in about 4 months from now.

I think my happiest time in my life is the day I proposed to my wife and when she said that she accepted. Three months later, we got married. I believe my life has started since I got married. I don't believe that I lived any life before I was married. Therefore, I consider my relationship with my wife the most important relationship in my whole life.

In regard to my future plan after I get my PhD, I am actually interested in working at the university level as a professor. If I can't find such a job here, I will try to work hopefully in the Arabic Gulf countries such as Kuwait, or the United Arab Emirates. My wife will also go with me to teach there; we both know that it may be difficult for her but our staying there will be temporarily, because we will have vacations every year for about three months and we can come to US in these vacations.

I think I have very important accomplishments in my life. The first accomplishment is the fact that I will be done with my MA in TESOL very soon. The second one is the IUP admission to pursue my PhD. Finally, the third accomplishment in my life is a social one which is my marriage. However, I have two concerns that worry me nowadays; first, I am worried about my PhD studies, I always ask myself: Can I do it? Another concern pertains to the future job and I always ask myself: Can I find a job after my PhD graduation?

In terms of my age, I am now about thirty one. Sometimes I feel that I passed the "expiration" date, in other words, when I think about finishing my PhD by the age of thirty four; I feel frustrated. However, when I see other people who are forty or forty five years old and they have just started their B.As or even their MAs, I really feel relieved.

After staying for almost two years in the US and doing my MA, I believe that I am in the process of learning, hopefully from what we call good to better. I am also changing in terms of my thinking of the world. The way I analyze or look at things is different now, from the way I used to look at things in the past before I came here. Because I face different cultures all the time, every day, not only on the academic level, but also on the non-academic level. In US, you meet a lot of people from all over the world, so this would broaden your horizons, and it would broaden your views and perspectives and points of view. You would have different points of view about the same thing, not very fixed or petrified kind of static state of mind. I believe I'm now in a more changeable process of mind or state of mind. You always hear different things from different people about the same thing or about different things, so I think my mind is changing and is being enriched, and is being broadened by many different things. Socially speaking, after my marriage, I feel that I live my life in a stabled rhythm.

My vision of death is that it is inevitable. It will happen sooner or later whether you are here, on the moon, in Asia, in Africa or in any other place in the world. I believe that death is a very difficult thing to imagine. The only thing that I would like to have before my death is to see my own children. I would like to have the chance to raise them and to have them all the time by my side. I believe that children are very important to one's life. Death is unpredictable; I may die now, tomorrow or in any other time. However, I would like to die peacefully, in a sudden death, I don't want to die in a lot of pain, I don't want to die because of chronic or malignant disease, but at the same time, everything happens as God wants it to be, so I don't have the choice to choose the way I die. I believe that I will die as God wants me to die.

