

Lewis University

Digital Commons at Lewis University

First Year Writing Showcase

Spring 2022

Expectations

Sophia Ashour
Lewis University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lewisu.edu/fywshowcase>



Part of the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ashour, Sophia, "Expectations" (2022). *First Year Writing Showcase*. 5.
<https://digitalcommons.lewisu.edu/fywshowcase/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons at Lewis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in First Year Writing Showcase by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Lewis University. For more information, please contact lenaghan@lewisu.edu.

Nomination #7

CW1

Expectations

I was at my customer service job like I am every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday morning. An elderly man walked up to my counter. He saw me wearing a headscarf, calling out to the eye that I am a Muslim and more than likely an Arab woman. He assumed my identity, and began to speak a foreign language to me as is commonly done. All I could understand from what he said in Arabic was, "Hi, how are you?" He followed it, with what I assumed was a question about something in the store. I looked at him blankly as I could barely string a sentence of Arabic myself. *Here we go again, another opportunity to be looked down upon.* "I'm sorry sir, I don't speak Arabic." Immediately he says with a surprised yet disappointed expression, "Where are you from? Your parents never taught you? Are they non-Arabic speakers themselves?" I reply, "Falastine, No Amo (uncle, a word typically said to recognize an older gentleman) they never taught me how to speak Arabic, no my father and mother both speak fluently." *Okay it's over.* Relief hit me as soon as the questions stopped and he began speaking to me in English. "Oh... I just had a few questions about my laptop." I reply, "Okay, it's going to be the next line over at Geek Squad." He responds, "Shoukrun (thank you)." While smiling I say, "Ofwen (your welcome)." It's become a weekly experience and has become something I've gotten used to. However, the older I get the more frequently it happens. At certain points I am on the verge of just telling them I am a convert to make it understandable. Although the feeling of

embarrassment and yearn for this language that is used so commonly in not only my culture but faith never left.

I know my parents sometimes regret not speaking in the house when we were kids because it's a lot harder for us to learn now than back then. Like many first-generation children of immigrants my oldest brother can understand and speak the most and then me while my younger brother knows next to nothing. In America we call American speakers out about how they speak. If they have the *tongue*- the ability to speak it as it is said and not with an English accent which is a problem my younger brother and I commonly face. I frequently ask my mom, "Gosh mama, why didn't you and baba teach us when we were younger?" And every time she replies with, "I told your dad to but he never did." *But you should've pressed him on it or at least started the conversation.* This didn't make much sense to me because if they wanted to then they would've put in the effort. I felt like I missed out on a lot by not speaking: inside jokes between other Arabs spoken in class all throughout grade school, communicating with family members from overseas that visited, and being the only one that needed translation when something was said in a group. I always felt that my life would have been at least a little easier if I spoke Arabic. My dad who was kicked out of his home in Palestine and moved to Jordan at a young age lived there through most of his 20's until he received a student visa and moved to Chicago. He struggled a lot but eventually learned English fluently through ESL classes at school, TV, and working a waiter job. After all his hard work on learning it, he commonly brags on the fact that people didn't think he was Arab as his American accent was "so good." I think that plays on the fact as to why he didn't teach us. He wanted us to grow up the way he wanted to, living the American Dream. My mom works a full-time job in downtown Chicago so during my childhood she was out of the house from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. every Monday through Friday. My dad had to sacrifice his job and become a mostly stay at home dad with owning a small business on

the side until my siblings and I grew up. My mom had wanted him to teach us and for it to be a part of our life but it didn't work out that way. My dad and I would frequently have conversations and would agree on "speaking only Arabic at home." This started up in middle school. After a couple of hours, we were back again to English. At this point in my life, I know only simple words that are used on an everyday basis. I can go 1-10 with numbers and I only know a couple of colors.

Unlike my mom I can read and write pretty well while she can mostly just speak it. I have been in Arabic school almost my whole life. This focused on learning the Quran rules, spelling test, and memorizing chapters from the Quran; they don't teach you how to speak it as the teachers only spoke in English. I was happy they did this because at least I had correlated with something in that language. I memorized not as much as I would have liked to as I commonly switched from a school to a tutor. I forgot and then relearned many concepts. I think when I was a child, I never focused on what I didn't know. It wasn't really a big deal as a child as no one was just coming up to me randomly and speaking different languages.

I have traveled to Jordan and Palestine twice in my life. Once as a baby and another time at 7. When we went for the second time I apparently came home speaking better than I ever had. My older cousin, who lived with us at the time, who left from Jordan to receive an education here said, "Sophia, when you came back home you were practically fluent. You spoke the best I've ever heard from you." I responded, "Really!?" *Wow! I wish I could remember how good I was.* I felt so much pride in this moment. I didn't have to think about the struggle with learning Arabic then. It just happened on its own. However, after living there for a month and then coming back to speaking predominantly English left a mark and never again did I speak as

well as I did when I first came back. I had to learn how to speak when I was there. It was the only way to communicate to my 70+ cousins and 13 aunts and uncles. They didn't speak English other than a very broken, "Hi, how are you?" Learning it back then was the only way to get around. All the movies, shows, people spoke Arabic. It wasn't really a choice back then as it is now to learn this language. Being told I was good at it really made me feel good and confident because it showed at one point in my life I did put in the effort and learned and that maybe I could still continue to do that today.

Don't get me wrong, I have tried. I would download apps, joined a four-week course at Lewis that was supposed to allow you to learn Arabic. However, after only learning the basics the first week that I had known my whole life I decided to drop it. *Everything I try just doesn't work. Why did this have to be 'my' struggle?* I was conflicted knowing that I would not know my own home language. The language that is dear in my religion. I had the choice to just put in the work and learn yet I choose to only put in minimal effort. Although there are different translations of the Quran for different languages, people all over the world memorize it in Arabic as it is its sacred language.

I began listening to recitations by scholars and imams. Now, on my thirty-minute drive to school and back home I am trying to pronounce in the way they do so that I could at least have that, the ability to correctly and beautifully speak in my native language. I ask questions more now, when spoken to in Arabic. Instead of feeling embarrassed I just ask, "What does that mean?" Right off the bat, I started to learn new things. Over the summer, I am planning on putting in the work with flashcards and studying as I now have a clearer idea of what I need to do. I realized I have to make a change in my own life. Learning a different language doesn't

come easily, especially at the age I am now. I know now that I don't have to yearn for it, I just need to take the next steps in learning and consistently practicing it. I believe it will make me more confident in myself. I won't feel as insecure when having to laugh when someone speaks to me in Arabic just so they can believe I understand what they are saying. It will shift my outlook and bring me closer not only to my religion but to others, those I couldn't communicate with before. Constantly not living up to the expectations of friends, family, and even strangers around you can be rough, but figuring out what you want to do for yourself and taking action on that is so much more important. We won't always be able to fit a perfect mold but having the mindset that you can do whatever you put your mind to can truly change your outlooks on life.