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Your first Arabic lesson

In Hana's school

By

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Workshop 12

Non fiction story

2255 words

“Marhaba. Mrs Hana. I am Alexa”

“Ahlan Alexa” I said. “Please come in.” I closed the school door and showed the woman who should be in her early thirties the way to my office. Her brown long hair nicely resting on her shoulders gave her a fresh look and her flowered blouse with all nice pastel colours reflected nicely on her beautiful smile. I liked her and I am always happy when I like my students at first site.

“You said you want to learn some conversational Arabic? You seem to know a bit.” I smiled and took my seat behind my simple black desk.

“As I explained to you over the phone Mrs. Hana” She sat in the chair in front of me. “Carlo is trying to teach me some words but he travels often for business. We don't really have time and I want to surprise him with more knowledge. I am sure you can help me.” After taking out a small note book she put her shoulder bag on the side table.” I am planning to visit my boyfriend's parents in Beirut after 3 weeks and I would like to learn some language basics to please them.” She flipped open the note book.

“Off course Alexa I can and I will.” I took her notebook and looked at what she had already written.

“I know Hello is Marhaba, Welcome is Ahlan wa sahlán”

“Correct.” I glanced through the first page “What else do you already know?”

Her eyes gleamed “I know bahibek is I love you and habibi is my love.” a faint blush crept into her cheeks “I know all the names of things written in the book.”

I turned the page and found nothing else written. I smiled, nodded and stood up. “Let’s go to the class room and start” She took the book and closed it.

In the small class room she stared at the colourful panels of the Arabic alphabet hanging around the walls and said “I wish I had time to learn reading and writing as well.” She sat on one of the many chairs around the main round table. “I will do one day; I am really interested to understand the culture.”

“She must be deeply in love with Carlo” I thought.

I started my computer and the projector. “Usually my first lesson contains the daily greetings that are very important part of people’s relations in the Arabic culture and traditions.” I went to the white board with my black marker. “Okay?”

Alexa, held her pen over a clean page said excited “Yes let’s start”

I pointed to her note book “I will give you a printed document with all the greetings.” I thumped the board “Don’t waist your time copying just concentrate on the pronunciation.”

I wrote on the board saying “Ana Hana. I am Hana”

“Ana Alexa”

The screen appeared through the projector when the computer was ready. I left the marker on the board and opened the greeting document.

“ohh” She said pushing her eye brows up “This entire page is greetings?”

“No my dear, this is one of three pages.”

“Oh! Okay. And I thought I know much.” She murmured.

I held my laser pointer and followed the first line “Hello is Marhaba It can be used as welcome as well and the response is ahlan or marhabten.”

“Ok, Marhaba, ahlan, marhabteen.” She smiled and gave me a thumb up. I gave her a thumb up as well. “This is a general greeting.” I turned to the screen “Some greetings you should specify to masculine or feminine but this one is a general one and you can use it to respond to all male, female and plural.”

“I see.” She said.

“(How are you)” I pointed to the man in the family poster hanged next to the screen “Addressing a man is *keifak*”. Then I pointed to the woman in the poster “(How are you) addressing a woman is *keifek*”.

She stood up walked towards the poster and repeated acting like shaking the hand of the man and the woman “*Keifak, Keifek.*”

I went next to her and put my hand on the poster indicating the whole family “When you want to address more than one person you say *keifkom.*”

Pointing with her finger “*Keifak, keifek, keifkom*” She repeated. Then suddenly turned to me and said “Yes. I will meet the whole family?”

Leading her to her seat I thought “then she must be in a serious relationship.”

She sat down. “You are meeting them all! Then what will you say when any of them ask you keifek Alexa?” I pointed to the response and she read “mn... mni... mniha”

“Good. we say it again. Keifek?”

“Mniha” She shot me a quizzical look. I smiled and nodded. Relaxed she said “I don’t have to learn their responses. Am I? ”

I nodded again and using my pointer “We continue. Good morning.”

She interrupted saying “*sabah el-**h**eir.*”

“*Sabah el-**kh**eir*, Alexa you should stress on **kh**. Some Arabic letters should be pronounced from the rear of your nasal cavity.” I put my fingers on the centre of my neck “I mean from the deep end of your voice chords KH, KH.”

“*Kh, sabah el-kheir*” putting her pointer finger on her vocal cords.

“Good.” I remembered Alain my British student who hated this letter and couldn’t pronounce the name of his colleague at work Khaled. He called him Haled or Kaled but luckily Cypriotes don’t have problem with this letter.”

I said pointing to the screen “Read the response for me.”

She placed her pen down and said surprised “Good morning has a response? Good morning is a good morning.”

I Turned towards her “My dear Alexa” pointing to the second column in the document, I said “I want you to perceive that all greetings have response and it is important to learn the correct one. Even good morning has one.”

She wiggled raising her shoulders “Okay.” Then read “*Sabah el-nour*. It is easy without any KH.”

“Yes it is.” And both are general.”

“Great.” She said approaching her two hands to clap then stopped.

I pointed to the next line. ”Good evening is *masa el-kheir* and the response is.”

She interrupted me “*masa el-nour*. I believe it is general too.”

“Yes they are.”

I was about to start reading the next line when I heard her voice delicately
“Mrs Hana, Excuse me. Can we envisage my meeting with the parents and you teach me how to deal with it?”

“You want a tailor made lesson. Don’t you?”

She rubbed her hands together.

I put my pointer down looking at her tender face, very excited to please her in laws and thought “I wish my children’s future wives are that considerate.”

I pulled the drawer under the computer “Let me give you the printed document” I got the file and took a sheet “This is the first greetings page try to memorize them.

Looking at it she said “Should we do the exercise now?”

“Of course. And I will be Mrs. Koury” I crossed my hands towards my heart in loving act and said “Or you want me to be Carlo”

She gleamed “Yes. Yes”

She jumped from her seat went to the door and entered again “Marhaba Carlo”

I opened my hands welcoming her Ahlan Alexa marhabten.”

She moved to the other side of the class. With a smart, shy smile and hesitating voice “I will arrive in the evening.” She attempted “*Masa el-heir* Mrs Koury”

“Alexa” I interrupted. “Masa el-kheir. Kh. Kh”

“Oh sorry! Kh.KH. Masa el-kheir Mrs Koury” and she forwarded her hand towards me. “*Masa el-nour Alexa. Ahlan wa sahlan.*”

“U!U?” She looked to the screen “??”

I shook her hand laughing “I am not the real Mrs Kouri, what happened?”

She laughed “yes I know but I was trying to find an answer as you said”.

“Good. Good. You got the principal. Greeting and answer.”

Looking at the screen up and down “But what I would answer her?”

With low voice and a big smile I said “Thank you” I nodded “You just say thank you and you know it in Arabic don’t you?”

“Shukran, shukran.” Then bowed saying “marhaba Mrs. Koury” turned as if she is addressing someone else and continued “Marhaba Mr. Koury”.

“Ahlan habibty.” I said embracing her and encouraging her to say more.

“Keifak Mr. Kouri?” She said looking to the other side then turned towards me

“Keifek Mrs Koury?”

I tapped her shoulder “Bravo.”

Her anxious reaction made me think of a joke to terrify her. I said “And if they were all waiting for you at the airport and said together ahlan wa sahlam what would you response?”

“Really, they could come all to the airport?”

“Yes.” I smiled.

“You are joking Mrs. Hana aren’t you?”

“But not very long ago all families used to go to the airport to welcome visitors.” A quick image cropped up from my memory bank to see the happy faces of my grand parents, my uncle and his wife, my two married aunties and their husbands, my unmarried aunty and of course my parents and us seven grandchildren I was the eldest, a Ten years old girl. We were all holding different sizes of colourful flower bouquets in the airport hall to welcome my uncle who had been in America for 10 years. I can’t forget my grand mother’s eyes full of tears looking to her family joined all together hugging her elder son with a lot of passion.

“You don’t mean it Mrs. Hana? They will not come to the airport.”

She bashed the table, “Of course, like here in Cyprus. All family go to welcome students especially when they come on their first Christmas holiday.” She posed, seemed to pull her memory photo then smiled and pushed her eye brows and said “I will feel embarrassed if they do.” I looked to her face blushing. “I will ask Carlo any way.” I said laughing and making a bow “So if they come all what would be your response to them when they will all say ahlan wa sahlán” She moved her hand indifferent and said “It is not very difficult I just say shoukran, keifkon?”

I laughed loudly and clapped for her.

“I am happy, but it looks like I will have to do a lot of learning if I really want to please them.”

I tapped on her shoulder “Yes my dear. And I assume they will appreciate your effort.” I turned away as another memory photo cropped up and saw my grand mother sad face struggling to make a conversation with my uncle’s American wife or to talk to his daughter. My grand mother didn’t have the luxury to learn English and my uncle’s wife didn’t do any effort to learn or teach any of her children any Arabic.

“Are you learning just to please them?” I said.

With a low voice she replied “And to be able to understand all what they say.”

I laughed and warned her with my pointing finger “Naughty.” She laughed loud and said “No Mrs. Hana, they all speak English but I like to understand the language. I like the songs I want to know the lyrics.”

“That is a good reason.”

I pointed to the screen and said “Before I close the page I want you to learn small important things.” She looked surprised “small?”

“Yes don’t worry.” I walked towards the table at the corner, picked a water cup and went to her and offer it to her. She took it and said “Shoukran” Pleased with her intelligence I pointed to the answer on the screen “What I should answer?”

She read “Afwan.”

“Well done Alexa.” I pointed to the screen again “Two important expressions left. Yes and No.”

Reading from the screen she said “Yes is na-em. No is la.”

I laughed and said or just simply nod your head up or down. She laughed and repeated “Naem, la la la.”

I closed the greeting document and opened a new document on the screen. I asked her “Do you know any of the numbers?”

“Yes sure. Wahed, tnein, tlate, arb3a, kh kh “

I pointed to the new page “khamse, sitte, sab’a, tmene, tis’a and ashra”

“Count them alone one more time”

I went to the board with my black pen and wrote “wahed, tnein,” in Arabic while she was counting until ten.

١٠	٩	٨	٧	٦	٥	٤	٣	٢	١	•
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0

“Shall I write them down?”

I pulled the number’s document from another file and gave it to her “practice writing them on this document.”

She practiced writing. When she finished I pointed to the free line saying “write your telephone number.”

She wrote.

“Read your number for me.”

“Tis’a tis’a sitte tlate arb’a, khamse khamse wahed. Good?”

“Yes it is very good.”

I looked to the time, turned the projector off “I wish I had more time today”

“Thank you very much Mrs Hana. I cleared many sounds in my mind. I will learn this well until next lesson.”

She put her pen, note book and the documents I gave her in her bag and we walked together toward the door. “What was good bye?”

I opened the door and said “Maa s-salame”

“Yes yes maa s-salame”

“I will act Carlo’s mother next lesson as well. Ok??”

She laughed waving good bye for me.