

Teaching English to a Legally Blind Iraqi-Syrian Refugee in Canada

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I met a blind man in a beginner's English class for immigrants offered at a university. My boss called him a "double refugee" who had fled from Iraq to Syria, then from Syria to Canada. Later, I learned from M he had emigrated from Syria years earlier under completely different circumstances. When we first met, he had been in Canada for only seven months and knew barely enough English to order a coffee. From the friendship that developed through our professional relationship, I can only relate a patchwork of my experiences with M, stitching together intimate fragments from his life, with so many details lost in translation or left overseas.

The combined differences in language, culture and ability challenged communication and teaching. M's eyes see only the faintest shadows. In a typical tragedy of translation, he received cataract surgery which he excitedly expected would restore his sight. In reality, no functional improvement was noticeable. Nevertheless, M displays keen spatial awareness; from a moving vehicle, he calls out passing landmarks, like his church food bank, and suggests directions for the best route.

The English language program, however, relied on sight as much as sound; its speciality hire (me) and two alternating teachers were not trained to accommodate the blind, and we could not speak Arabic or Farsi. However, an Algerian and a Somalian student both spoke Arabic, rewarding M socially and emotionally. During breaks, I would speak to the Algerian in my broken Anglicized version of the French common to our countries' colonial histories, which she then translated into Arabic for M, ultimately and ironically to facilitate his assimilation into English colonial history. Yet during class time, the students needed to focus on English instead of the multilingual echo chamber of the international classroom; M's tendency to drift into Arabic distracted everyone from the language they needed to communicate with in Canada. What I never realized until meeting M is that in Canada, even if two people speak the same language, they may need English to communicate that fact. In a halal grocer, for example, M asked a clerk for chicken liver by repeatedly pressing a finger to the clerk's heart, then further down his torso, saying, "of chicken, not heart but *like* a heart" for want of the word "liver." As M struggled, gesticulating and confusing "chicken" and "kitchen," the laughing clerk not only failed to realize M was blind, but also that they both spoke Arabic.

Tasked with adapting lessons for non-visual reception, I waited for overworked teachers to give lesson plans rarely prepared in advance. Braille translations took a week, so M never received papers on time to learn along with the rest of his classmates.¹ M's English was the worst in the classroom, worsened because sight was the education's bias blind spot. Unable to read printed exercise sheets himself, M had to rely on a second, aural conduit: me. Two words into a reading, and one already

¹ Fortunately, at least M's Arabic Braille knowledge translated smoothly to English Braille, a testament to twentieth-century Braille internationalization and romanization efforts. Eventually, a contact in Syria was able to ship M a Braille English-Arabic dictionary only available in Egypt.

needed explanation; it became impossible to keep track of statements, comprehension questions and word definitions in what under visual circumstances would be much simpler. It could take several minutes to explain a single word or concept, and many required explanation. As M would insist, “I can’t speak! I have little English! I need *words!*” But the structure of the class’s exercises thwarted M’s progress.

Teaching M required a combination of touch, hand shapes, props, sound effects, role-playing, real-world practice, and circuitous stop-and-go explanations relying on M’s scarce vocabulary. Some explanations were easy. Action verbs like “throw” or “leave” could be performed. M would laugh when I threw a pen at a chalkboard, or left my seat and exited the room, only to immediately return then leave again to conjugate a different tense. More abstract concepts like “how?” and “why?” required circuitous explanations; words like “here” and “there,” or “then” and “now,” I spatialized by drawing M’s hand across different points on a desk, an arm, a book or other prop. For a time, he would often ask me, “How are you yesterday?” meaning “What did you do yesterday?” Sometimes M applied my corrections, but other times he made jokes (“How are you tomorrow!”). When “Antarctica” came up in a story we read, I took M’s hand and used algebra to sculpt his palm into a globe:

“This is Earth.”

“What is Earth?”

I poked one side of M’s fist: “This is Canada.” Then the opposite: “This is Iraq.”

“Ah! I know.”

I painted on some oceans, blanketed his whole fist in my palms, and said, “This is Earth.” “Aaaaaaaaah! Now I know.”

M’s understandings quickened as he acquired more words, and as I became intimately familiar with his language. While M learned English, I learned “M-isms.” I found that communication with M was not challenging--just communication “in English.” Between us emerged a

dialect of sounds and movements, which to some extent only he and I could speak. M would regularly utter “tik tik tik,” an onomatopoeia he had introduced to me while walking two fingers through the air or across a table; his classmates, other teachers and strangers were bewildered by such “M-isms,” so I had to make a point of correcting some with “correct” English sounds. Since M’s English vocabulary began so small, versions of our ever-evolving supplementary private dialect were a necessary heuristic. M’s linguistic successes, though, are a bittersweet accomplishment. M needed English, but teaching it also enabled a colonial Anglicization which had, in many ways, begun “a world away” when wars perpetuated by Anglophone countries led to M’s being displaced and having to assimilate within yet another Anglo culture. I felt I was overwriting the joyful idiosyncrasies that M had developed from his unique circumstances. M *could* communicate, but in a dialect that in a prescriptivist Anglo-purist culture often triggered confusion, or even laughter. It sometimes took patience to understand what M was getting at, but he was always there waiting—you just had to persevere along with him. M readily recognized when normative English lessons failed him, and we spent increasingly more time together in our own classroom.

There, what were previously digressions from the class to explain new words increasingly proved more valuable than the class lessons and exercises themselves. Liking to repurpose more than just language with impromptu neologisms, M used McDonald’s coupon booklets to stencil important new words in Braille. These mementos eventually filled his pockets and his kitchen table in organized stacks. Stories from class, meanwhile, tended to be variously literary, childish, factually trivial (“Volcanic Eruptions”) or more culturally specific rather than worthwhile (“Friday the Thirteenth”). M hated these lessons: “*Yanni*,² this is story! This is not life! This is not, ‘Hello! I would like ... one

² “You know” (Arabic).

coffee, please.” The phrase was part of his first successful classroom goal: to order coffee politely.

The other students learned to navigate a grocery store using a map, find prices and learn the names of fruits and vegetables; I brought real food items for M to feel and identify, and made M ask me for directions to find a particular item in “grocery” aisles built of classroom desks. Field trips included learning how to get around his favourite stores, Dollarama and “Tiger” (Giant Tiger). When the students were tested with a bank teller-themed conversation, I escorted M to his real bank so he could properly manage his finances; learning English is great, but sometimes you need to literally pay the bills, and M needed help.

M learned best through actual conversation instead of thematic exercises. We were teacher and student, but through organic storytelling M and I first related to each other as two human beings instead of two institutionalized subjects stuck in a contrived “lesson space.” Such a space was especially problematic when it was all too often dictated by sheets of paper hastily printed from free ESL lesson websites by overextended staff in a process which sometimes made students themselves seem like computers being dictated to by punch card instructions. As a result of our human interaction, the conversation sometimes turned to M’s past, producing an absurd combination of unspeakable subject matter and grammar lesson:

“When did you leave Iraq?”

“I’m outside at Baghdad in nineteen ... ninety-five. I’m outside *Iraq*. Not Baghdad, I’m outside *Iraq*.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Because I’m two year in the ... uh ... policeman government under the ... under the floor.” *Policeman government* meant “prison”; *under the floor* meant “in an underground cell.” Another time, he briefly mentioned how he became imprisoned: saying the wrong thing in front of a police officer. He does not repeat it, I do not know if he can in English, and I do

not think I want to ask. “My eyes is ... ah ... [hesitates] is electric ... laser ... *Shhhhhhhht!* My eyes now [slash a finger across his eyes].”

“They put electricity to your eyes?”

“Yes.”

“They shocked your eyes? ... *Bzzzt. Bzzzt. Bzzzt.* Like that?”

“To hydro, yes, to hydro.”

Having to ask me to review his hydroelectric power bills has provided him a name for the cause of his blindness.

“And you were in prison in Iraq?”

“Yes. For two years. Under the ... floor.”

“Under ground?”

“Under ground.”

“If we say it is inside a building, we say this [tapping floor with foot] is the floor. But outside, this [tapping floor] is the ground. Inside, floor. Outside, ground.”

“Ah, ground.”

“So, *under the ground*, we say ‘underground.’”

“Ah, underground, yes.”

Silence can fall after conversations like this. I will absorb what he just shared with me, and my sense of inadequacy in being able to address it. The mood of such conversations does not shift with the interjected grammar lessons.

“Yes, before [more than] 20 years [ago], I was not a blind. I was a see—I saw, very good. I have license for driver, I have a car, I have children, I have wife, but everything ... *went*. Because I went to ... prison.” Now, no longer a cab driver in Iraq, M jokingly refers to his fold-up white cane as his “car.” “After that I am blind. After blind, I went to Iran, I live in Iran about ten years.”

He also spent time in Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Kuwait, India, China, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia, before settling in Damascus, Syria, to resume another job he had had in Iraq: professor of Arabic and Farsi

language and literature, in which he holds a master's degree. However, eventually, "I am tired of 'Where is your ID, where is your ID! Where is your passport! Where is your passport!' This is ... Arabic government You sleep, ID beside you, here. You go to bathroom, this is ID." As the Syrian civil war escalated, he navigated a labyrinth of Syrian bureaucracy until the United Nations granted him passage to Canada. An Iraqi woman, a homecare worker who has lived in Canada for over thirty years, volunteered to help upon M's arrival. Since then, he has met other Arabic speakers at the local mosque, where he also volunteers as an Islamic teacher. For a while, he even frequented a church and played the "org" (organ) for Christian mass.

"I have now some friends, yes," he tells me now. This differs from a monthly classroom journal entry he dictated to me: "I'm very sad because I [am] very far from Syria and Iraq, I have no family and no friends, only one [or] two friend[s]."

The question of family emerged awkwardly many times during class when students divided into conversation groups. M would either avoid the question, not answer unless pressed (which other students did not notice since they were used to having to repeat questions for M), or answer right away, "*This* is my family!" spreading his arms to indicate the class, or pointing to me and saying, "This is my teacher, my son, my father, my brother, my grandfather!" Or he would gesture to a student and say, "My daughter!" or "My son!" which was how he came to greet them regularly; or else he would mix people's genders on purpose and get people laughing. Until he told me about prison in Iraq, I had guessed he had lost his family in the wars in Iraq or Syria. It is possible he did lose some. The only other family detail he ever revealed was simply that he did not know where some of his siblings were: "In Baghdad? Not in Baghdad? Life, not life, I don't know!" But the Syrian conflict also separated him from his "future wife," as he refers to the woman with whom he is in a close relationship. She wants to immigrate to Canada,

but since she and M are not yet legally married, their future together remains uncertain. Their cell phones are their lifelines, through which M takes and sends photos that he himself cannot see.

In the meantime, M retains his good humour. He has an uncanny ability to sense others' moods, and to cheer them. "Smile, my daughter! Smile, my brother! Laugh, ha-ha! This is life!"³

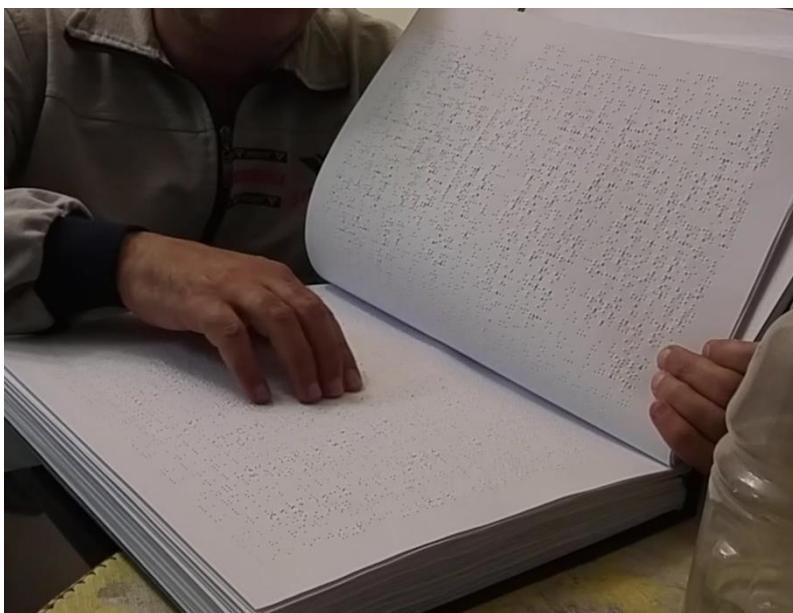


Fig. 1. M, singing his Arabic Braille Quran. (Photo Credit: Kevin Kvas)

³ Thank you to Shada Sagher, for her marvelous editing work. And to M, for sharing with me.



Fig. 2. *Tik, tik, tik:* M's Braille timepiece (with glass cover closed).
(Photo Credit: Kevin Kvas)



Fig. 3. M, typing Braille onto scrap junk mail using his Perkins Brailler typewriter.
(Photo Credit: Kevin Kvas)