

**S**ara Kassab's love and passion for English go beyond standard teaching skills. Although Sara has been teaching remotely during the COVID pandemic, she continues to serve refugee children in Baalbek, Lebanon. She expresses concern for the well-being of the children she teaches and the hurdles they have encountered. She emphasizes their resiliency and exalts the importance of education as a way out of poverty, neglect, and hardships.



**Sara Kassab at her graduation from the American University of Beirut**

Sara's path to her current position began when, as a student at the American University of Beirut, she volunteered at a refugee camp through a nongovernmental organization (NGO) called Jusoor (an Arabic word meaning "bridges"). Students came to the center from the refugee camps for Syrian children. Most were eight to 12 years old, and all had had interrupted schooling. Sara taught them English on Saturdays and Sundays.

During the two years she volunteered there, she was amazed to see the children return for her English class weekend after weekend. The smiles she encountered made her realize her passion for education. After graduation, Sara taught English and sciences at a private school for a year but felt that her calling was clear: to go back to teaching the population of refugees she had worked with before. With Teach For Lebanon in a partnership with Ana Aqra Association (*Ana Aqra* means "I read" in Arabic), she was assigned to the center in Baalbek, 67 km northeast of Beirut, teaching English, science, and math to students three to eight years old. Some lived in the refugee camp; others lived outside the camp. Many had never been in school before.

The school follows the Lebanese curriculum, and teachers like Sara have an educational mentor from Teach For Lebanon and Ana Aqra. Before the pandemic brought about remote learning, Sara's bright, colorful classroom was in a learning center run by the NGO, featuring walls decorated with the English alphabet, colors and their names, and a bulletin board where students displayed their work. Sara dedicated one of the corners to a "brain break" station, where students could select activities when they needed to take a mental break. The space has a large cushion for students to sit and read, solve puzzles, or use stress balls to help them deal with difficult emotions. When studying in person, each student has a small, individual chalkboard; with the chalkboards, students can spread out throughout the classroom to do an extra activity such as writing the word of the day or drawing.

When teaching in person, Sara uses word walls to reinforce letter sounds, high-frequency

words (students tap on these as they leave the classroom), and visuals to accompany texts; the classroom also has a writing corner and a story corner. In the story corner, students complete dialogues by filling in blanks with words they have recently learned. Students can keep those stories in their portfolios, which helps them feel proud of their work.

The materials Sara creates include a magical box of puppets. She uses the puppets to activate students' background knowledge and connect to previous lessons. For example, when introducing the letter C, she uses a puppet of a cat to introduce and review sounds, and to help students associate the spelling of *cat* with the puppet. She says that it is difficult to find appropriate materials already made; therefore, she creates her own. Although this can be time consuming, one benefit is that she is able to tailor the materials to the needs of her students and to her lessons.

Once the pandemic hit, concern for the future of the education program grew. When stores, factories, government buildings, and pretty much every business was closing, the impending closing of schools also loomed. Without time to train teachers in technology skills and best practices, schools had to shift from face-to-face to remote learning. Concern about whether each child would have access to virtual learning mounted; in general, the members of the refugee community have limited access to and knowledge of technology.

Sara says that "being determined that nothing should stop students' access to education" motivated her and her colleagues. The focus became training sessions for teachers and



**Sara presenting online at the Teach For All Global Conference in 2020**

parents. Although it wasn't easy, and every strategy and idea went through trial and error, this period helped everyone establish the best methods of instruction. Everyone in the school and the NGO prepared teachers, students, and parents while each person was facing health and socio-economic challenges. A key challenge was unreliable electricity and, therefore, inconsistent Internet connectivity.

A solution that Sara and her colleagues found was to create educational videos for students, who could watch them at different times or when the Internet was stable. Sara's idea was to convert slide presentations to videos. As she was the only one who knew how to do that, she trained other teachers in the center on how to screencast their lessons and how to compress videos so they could be sent to students. Along with each video, sent daily, teachers provided an activity for students to complete. Many families had only one phone, so students often had to wait for the phone to be available. After watching the video lesson, students completed the assignment via phone: sending a picture, a video, or a voice message to the teacher. Meanwhile, teachers had to convince parents that despite the difficulties, they should not pull their children out of school at an early age. At the beginning that was hard, and the engagement level was low. As parents and students became more comfortable with the videos and lessons, though, parents started watching the videos with their children and learning English. The level of engagement increased.

One way Sara dealt with the parents' lack of background knowledge was by teaching vocabulary through emotions. She describes this technique as "Personalizing the Vocabulary Learning Experience: A Fun Approach." To remember each step in this process, she uses a mnemonic device: PIES = Personalization, Interest, Emotions, Senses. According to Sara, "The ideas of personalizing the material, making emotional connections to it, and achieving a sense of ownership are three essential elements" of vocabulary teaching that she has tested in her classes. Using this strategy, she has seen both learners and parents enjoy learning words and understand that language is multidisciplinary,

including "vocabulary, listening, speaking, and much more," she says. For example, with the word *prepare*, students talk about the word and what they like to prepare with their parents—for instance, how they prepare tea.

One of the successes of this educational shift was the increased role that parents played in their children's education. Parents spent time being mentors, and Sara feels that this increased involvement will have lasting effects. Another significant achievement Sara saw was that her students became more independent and more motivated to continue their education.

Although Sara teaches English in Lebanon, she is not originally from Lebanon, and English did not always come easily to her. She was born and raised in the United Arab Emirates; growing up, Sara struggled to learn English. In seventh grade, she went to an English-only school and was the only one in her class who had been learning Arabic solely until then. Out of her struggles to learn English, though, Sara found her passion for the language.

Her family moved to Lebanon, and Sara completed her undergraduate degree and obtained her teaching diploma at the American University of Beirut. Her volunteer work showed her that teaching children with limited schooling in a refugee camp requires specialized training, and she has continued her professional development. Some training, imparted by Teach For Lebanon, focused on leadership, mission, vision, and student empowerment. With Ana Aqra, Sara took professional-development courses on teaching strategies to work with refugees. She fondly recalls a course called *Integrating Critical Thinking Skills into the Exploration of Culture in an EFL Setting*, saying, "I use lots of the activities I learned from the course . . . I did many identity activities and modified the greetings in the form of more culturally aware activities." Sara also took a class to help her teach English through content, as she teaches math and science in English.

Another way Sara bolstered her professional development was by joining the Online Professional English Network (OPEN)

Community of Practice. She has been part of many of the massive open online courses (MOOCs), global courses, and webinars offered through this platform. Notably, she recently became a live-event facilitator. Her hands-on involvement is deepening her expertise, which will in turn cascade to the students she teaches and the educators she supports.

For Sara, the rewards of teaching center on the hope she has for the future of her students; meeting the challenges of the pandemic led to rewards that she says are “beyond the educational scope.” Students were able to continue their education, and teachers successfully integrated twenty-first-century technology skills. Sara notes that teaching young learners how to use technology is a human rights issue: a child who doesn’t have the tools to compete in the global economy could be left behind and not have an economically viable future. In addition to the work the teachers did, Ana Aqra was able to offer data bundles for families who couldn’t afford better phone/data plans. During the pandemic, it really has taken a village to teach the children.

Sara points out that the learning community cannot exist without many important stakeholders, including parents, teachers, students, and project coordinators from centers in different regions who ask for support and materials. She has seen and hopes to continue to witness a more connected and well-informed learning community that can work together to strengthen the learning that takes place and therefore their society.

One of the skills that Sara is most proud of is the ability to empower teachers during a global pandemic, and she has been instrumental in preparing the next generation of Lebanese teachers. While working remotely, she taught colleagues how to use Google Drive to collaborate in lesson planning. When it turned out that many of the teachers didn’t have Gmail accounts, Sara proactively helped them create email accounts and use this form of communication. In addition, she provides workshops on integrating technology in the classroom for teachers in her region and other regions around Lebanon. She also works

with educators to improve their English skills and understand the curriculum set by the government. Moreover, Sara prepares all the materials for her students and their parents to support virtual learning.

Meanwhile, the financial situation in Lebanon is dire, and although Sara recognizes that this—along with the pandemic—can cause people to lose hope, she also knows that education can be a catalyst. She proudly says that “no challenge is too big or too hard on the road of learning.” Despite the economy and the toll that the pandemic has taken, Sara has seen teachers, parents, and students work together to bring a better future. Her students continue to be motivated, and they know that English is the language of instruction in many schools and universities—along with being the language of technology and games. Sara emphasizes the importance of the videos the teachers send to students; the videos are colorful and animated, they make learning fun, they provide engaging activities, and they remind students that their teachers are there to support them. Teachers have gone out of their way to call students, talk to them, and re-explain learning objectives. Having this level of communication helps the parents—many of whom have not completed their education—also become students. When parents watch the videos with their children and pronounce the words in English, students see their parents learning and become more motivated themselves.

In the coming year, Sara will have an even bigger impact on her community when she starts a new role as a mentor. She is sad to not be in the classroom, but her work will benefit more teachers, and thereby more students around Lebanon. It is teachers like Sara who make the world a better place for those truly in need.

This article was written by **Sandra Story**, a Regional English Language Officer currently serving in Manama, Bahrain.

Photos by Diala Yazbec